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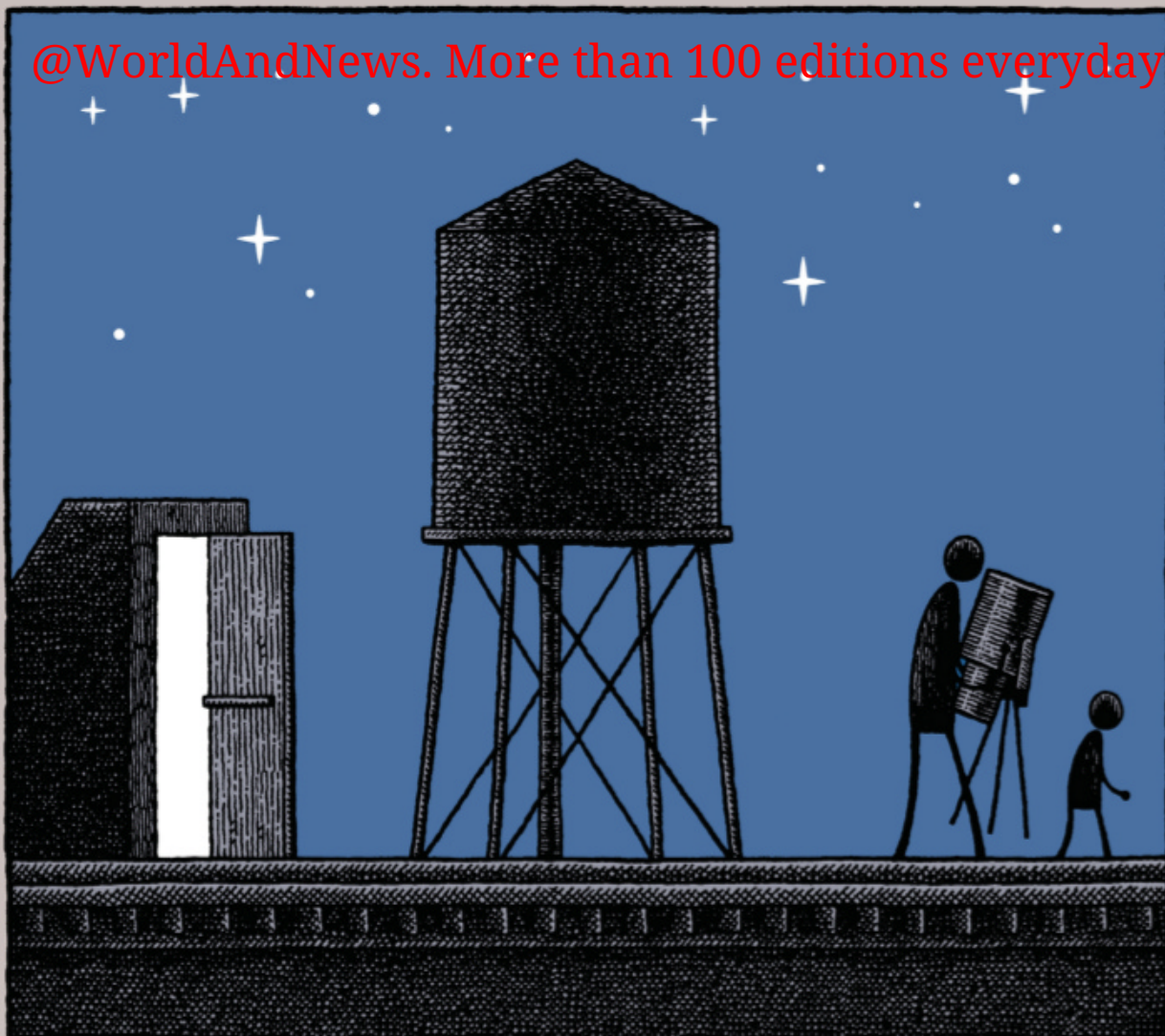
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THE NEW YORKER

DECEMBER 9, 2019

6 GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

15 THE TALK OF THE TOWN

Amy Davidson Sorkin on impeachment's next steps; jokes and ramen reviews; cryptocurrency for kids; bespoke book picks; minimalist pharaonic juggling.

DEPT. OF INNOVATION

Patricia Marx 22 The Realer Real
Adventures in the world of virtual reality.

SHOUTS & MURMURS

Cora Frazier 29 Deep State D.M.V.

ANNALS OF ALCOHOL

Anthony Lane 30 Ginmania
A spirit's journey through history.

A REPORTER AT LARGE

Dexter Filkins 36 Blood and Soil in India
Is Hindu nationalism destroying the nation's democracy?

PROFILES

Calvin Tomkins 52 The Enchanter
The uncompromising art of David Hammons.

FICTION

Clare Sestanovich 62 "Old Hope"

THE CRITICS

BOOKS

Kevin Young 68 *The letters of Ralph Ellison.*
71 Briefly Noted

POP MUSIC

Hua Hsu 74 *The mystery of Burial's dance transmissions.*

ON TELEVISION

Emily Nussbaum 76 *Damon Lindelof's "Watchmen."*

THE CURRENT CINEMA

Anthony Lane 78 *"The Aeronauts," "Portrait of a Lady on Fire."*

POEMS

Dorothea Lasky 41 "The Green Lake"
Terrance Hayes 65 "American Sonnet for My Past and Future Assassin"

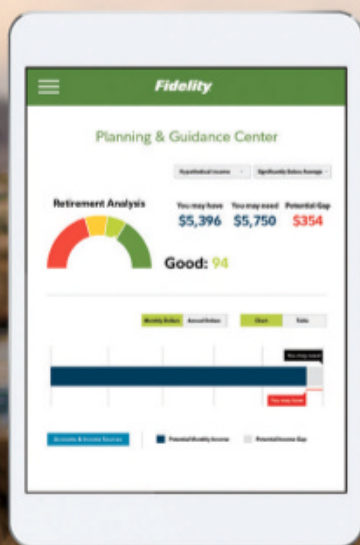
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2019 IN REVIEW

New Yorker writers and editors look back at the culture, politics, and stories that shaped the year.



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LEFT: MARIE ASSÉNAT; RIGHT: CHRISTOPH NIEMANN

THE MAIL

LITTLE ENGLAND

Isaac Chotiner, in his exploration of the United Kingdom's problematic relationships with Europe and the Commonwealth, rightly emphasized the shift in the country's global position during the mid-twentieth century—which resulted from its loss of empire and its struggle to establish a new identity for itself—as a reason for its current populist predicament (*A Critic at Large*, November 18th). I believe that the U.K.'s problems with Europe are also due to the demise of another feature of post-war British politics: the welfare state. Although the days of the sun never setting on the British Empire were over, we were nevertheless able to offer our citizens a social safety net that we hoped would be the envy of the world.

The conservative political revolution of the nineteen-eighties, in both the U.K. and the U.S., began to dismantle those social protections. As a consequence of a generation of deregulation, the fetishization of the market, and cuts to service provisions, average people feel exposed to the cold winds of change on their home turf. Their response may be to hunker down, look after themselves, and find others to blame. Given the impending British election, the jury is still out on what our future relationship with Europe will look like. But, as long as this sort of fearful individuality is ascendant, Chotiner is right to say that the U.K. appears “to be heading somewhere very dark indeed.”

Neil Small

Leeds, England

BOEING'S SHAME

Alec MacGillis's description of Samya Stumo made me weep—not only for the loss of this vibrant, lovely young woman but also for all the other deaths caused by crashes of Boeing 737 MAX planes (“After the Crash,” November 18th). What have we come to as a nation, to allow greed and profit to outweigh knowledge and science? How ironic that this tragedy has affected

Ralph Nader, Stumo's great-uncle, who has fought for the country's consumers for decades. Although he and his family are trying to restore sanity among negligent corporations in the airline industry, I doubt whether they or their fellow-advocates will be able to defeat those executives who are only looking out for their own interests.

Trish Dayan

Stamford, Conn.

As a former longtime employee of Boeing, I read MacGillis's piece in the hope of gaining a rational perspective on the company's problems, in contrast with the very emotional opinions of my Boeing-engineer friends. I grew sad from what I read, and then so angry that I could not sleep. The company MacGillis depicts is no longer the one I grew up with. Shame on Boeing.

Lori Sprinkle Kennedy

Seattle, Wash.

THE ALLURE OF “STAR TREK”

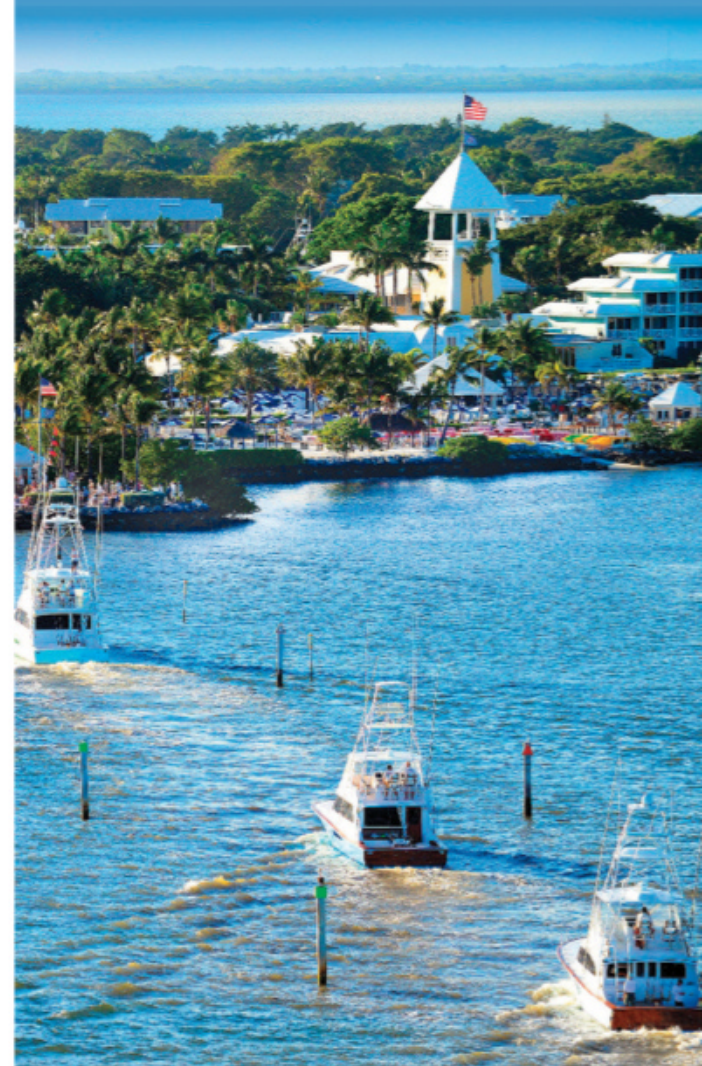
Like Michael Chabon and his father, I was entranced by “Star Trek”'s beauty and power—as was my father, a chemist whose zeal for science matched his passion for human progress (“The Final Frontier,” November 18th). We revelled in the swashbuckling idealism of Captain James Tiberius Kirk and the cool rationalism of Mr. Spock. Our fascination continued unabated even when the Enterprise's mission ended and the original crew ascended to the silver screen. In addition to depicting a noble tomorrow of equality, exploration, and peace, “Star Trek” evidently enriched more than one parent-child relationship; I'm grateful to Chabon for sharing how the show enhanced his own.

Rosario A. Iaconis

Mineola, N.Y.

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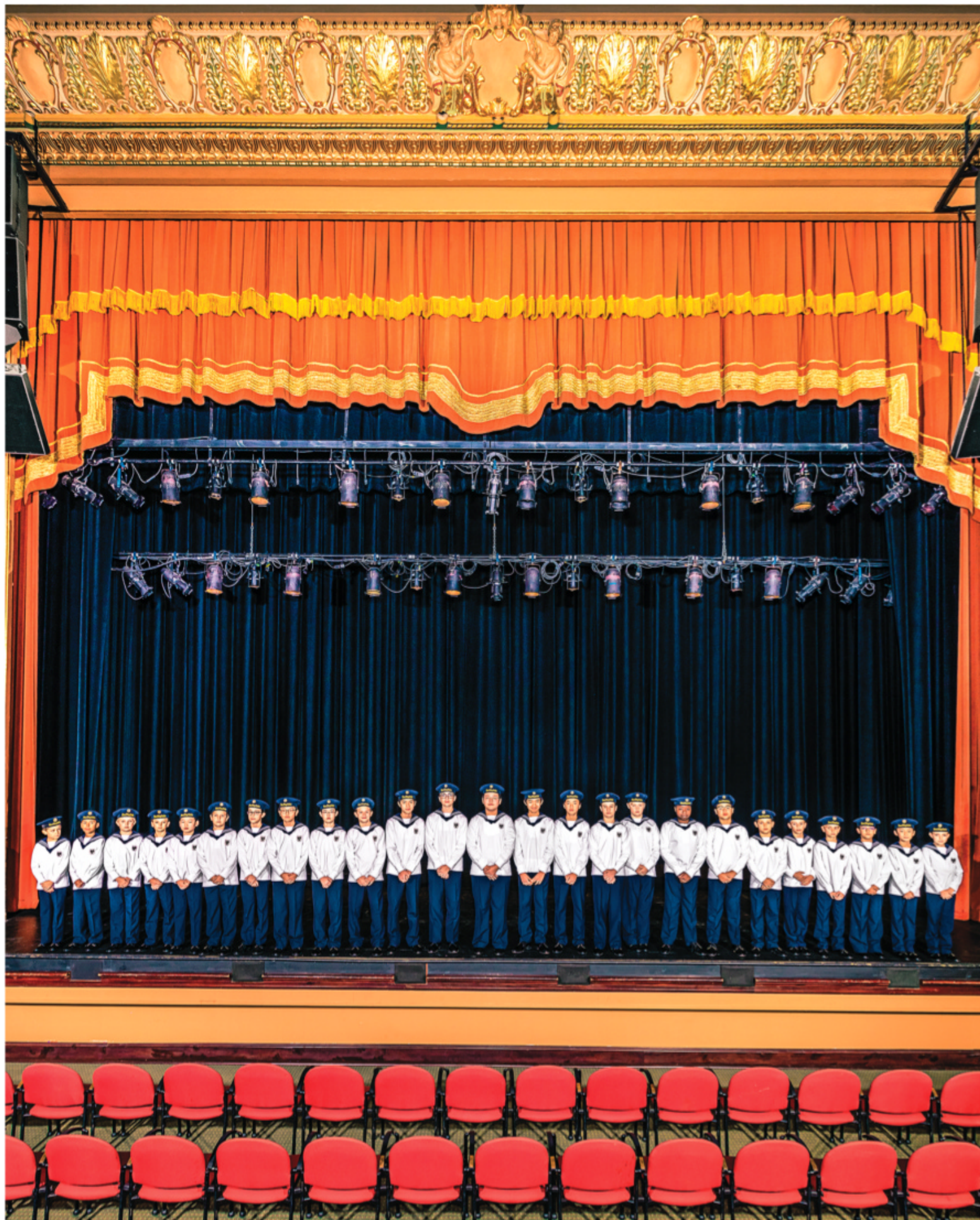
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GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN



For the first few centuries of its existence, the **Vienna Boys' Choir** performed only for the imperial court. Nowadays, the well-drilled ensemble, having traded its cadet uniforms for jaunty sailor suits, is more inclusive: its trebles hail from all over the world and entertain audiences on five continents. At the boys' annual holiday concert at Carnegie Hall, on Dec. 8, they apply their plangent sound to a grab bag of holiday-themed tunes that include "Adeste Fideles," "Let It Snow!," "O Holy Night," and other duly polished chestnuts.

PHOTOGRAPH BY DAN WINTERS

NIGHT LIFE

Musicians and night-club proprietors lead complicated lives; it's advisable to check in advance to confirm engagements.

Mary Halvorson

The Stone at the New School

Jimi Hendrix died too soon to win a MacArthur “genius” grant, but Mary Halvorson, a guitarist with a similar penchant for extending the sonic boundaries of her instrument, can now lay claim to the prestigious award. A residency at this new-jazz bastion finds the intrepid player in ensembles that range from coiled trios and a duo with the pianist Sylvie Courvoisier to Halvorson’s Code Girl sextet, featuring the vocalist Amirtha Kidambi.—*Steve Futterman* (Dec. 3-7.)

Vic Juris

Bar Bayeux

If you’re in tune with the work of the deeply accomplished and respected saxophonist Dave Liebman, you’re also well aware of the considerable talents of the guitarist Vic Juris, who has been associated with Liebman since the early nineties. A six-string wizard who is comfortable in any jazz setting, Juris heads up a trio at this enterprising club in the Prospect Lefferts Gardens neighborhood of Brooklyn.—*S.F.* (Dec. 4.)

Ani Cordero

The Sultan Room

Protest music is hard to regenerate: the classics have already been set in stone, and new compositions are rarely added to the canon. But the Puerto Rican singer and multi-instrumentalist Ani Cordero has a knack for writing gritty songs of resistance that feel as though they could belong to past decades. After interpreting *nueva canción* standards on her 2014 album, “Recordar,” Cordero—who was previously a member of the rock band Pistolera—strengthened her voice and her fight on her subsequent records, “Querido Mundo” and “El Machete.”—*Julyssa Lopez* (Dec. 6.)

Goldie

Avant Gardner

Born Clifford Price, the U.K. drum-and-bass d.j. and producer Goldie wasn’t the style’s originator, but he became its first figurehead, both symbolically, given the outsized impact of his debut album, “Timeless,” and literally, since the logo of his genre-defining record label, Metalheadz, is inspired by his own headphones-clad noggin. For this appearance in Brooklyn, he leads an all-Metalheadz lineup to commemorate the imprint’s twenty-fifth birthday; the show also includes Armani Reign, Ant TC1, and Adred.—*Michaelangelo Matos* (Dec. 6.)

The Blind Boys of Alabama

New York Society for Ethical Culture

The beloved gospel ensemble the Blind Boys of Alabama originated in 1939, when

the singers were students at a Talladega institute for blind children. Three of its founders were still dazzling audiences at the start of this millennium, but death has since thinned those ranks to one—the charismatic Jimmy Carter, now surrounded by younger recruits. Despite being a legacy act saddled with an antediluvian moniker of a thousand squirms, the group remains perennially fresh, whether it’s interjecting godliness into unexpected songs or, as in this case, saluting Christmas.—*Jay Ruttenberg* (Dec. 7.)

Emily Yacina

Union Pool

Emily Yacina’s early songs were understated, slightly introverted sketches, yet their undeniable prettiness stood out—largely because of Yacina’s weightless vocals, which some listeners might recognize from her collaborations with the D.I.Y. artist (Sandy) Alex G. Although both musicians color their melodies with a twinge of nostalgia and the ache of growing up, Yacina’s material is often far more subtle and spare. Her latest release, “Remember the Silver,” strengthens her work’s emotional pull, with arrangements that are just a touch fuller than those of her previous records.—*J.L.* (Dec. 7.)

Ciel

Nowadays

The Toronto d.j. and producer Cindy Li, who works under the moniker Ciel, has said that she wants her sets to have the wafting quality of the shoegaze rock she loved in adolescence. A Ciel performance often has a floating effect that’s especially notable given how wide-ranging her selections tend to be, from clangorous techno and jazzy broken beat to breakneck drum and bass. Her own production work is just as expansive and just as charming.—*M.M.* (Dec. 8.)

Xavier Omär

Webster Hall

Gospel music and R. & B. have plenty in common, but the singer Xavier Omär takes their connective threads as a rule. Under the moniker SPZRKT, the singer initially garnered attention in the Christian-hip-hop community, and later, in R. & B. circles, for his work with the sublime producer Sango. The pair’s first collaboration, “Hours Spent Loving You,” from 2015, introduced many listeners to Omär’s silky blend of the sacred and the profane; its follow-up, “Moments Spent Loving You,” from October, stands as a monument to romantic love and to the ways in which the secular can also be spiritual.—*Briana Younger* (Dec. 8.)

GRUNGE POP



Sadness is woven into the music of each generation, often spawning new styles dedicated to feelings of yearning, angst, and outright depression. Some artists of the present moment—such as the singer-songwriter **Deb Never**, who performs at Elsewhere on Dec. 6—have turned the mood into a genre itself, synthesizing a multitude of sounds to articulate those sensations. Raised between Spokane and Seattle, Deb Never owes as much to the grunge born in that region as she does to the emo corners of the Internet. (One might say that her star-boosting collaboration with BROCKHAMPTON, on the band’s moody single “No Halo,” seemed almost predestined.) Her debut EP, “House on Wheels,” marries rolling 808s and whining guitar riffs to lyrics that read like post-breakup journal entries; it’s a harmonious union that doubles as an affirmation of her commitment to both boundary-free creation and emotional purgatory.—*Briana Younger*

SOLO SHOW

With his thick glasses and thicker beard, the British monologist Daniel Kitson is part standup comedian, part hermit philosopher, and entirely his own creation. In his solo shows, which appear every few years like strange asteroids, he employs his nebbishy gift of gab to veer in unexpected directions. In “It’s Always Right Now, Until It’s Later,” which played in New York in 2012, he spun parallel tales of two fictional strangers, a man and a woman—but the vibe was less rom-com than existential shaggy-dog story. He returns to St. Ann’s Warehouse, his regular U.S. pit stop, with **“Keep”** (Dec. 4-19), which begins as a roster of his twenty thousand possessions—no surprise that he’s a bit of a hoarder—and digresses to God knows where.—*Michael Schulman*

Mayo Thompson Le Poisson Rouge

“Corky’s Debt to His Father,” the lone solo LP by Mayo Thompson, eked its way into the world in 1970, during a dormant spell for the Red Krayola, the singer’s psychedelic band. If the Red Krayola epitomizes a certain brand of difficult underground act—Thompson has said it was not misunderstood so much as disliked—“Corky’s” seems more like an emblematic cult record, twisting the ears of a fervent few. With an air of unnerving calm, Thompson performs the skewed and at times salacious album at this one-off anniversary concert.—*J.R. (Dec. 8.)*

THE THEATRE

A Bright Room Called Day Public

Tony Kushner’s troubled first play, about the rise of Fascism in nineteen-thirties Berlin, would have felt freshly resonant on its own terms, but the Public’s production undercuts its natural urgency with new allusions to “the clown from Queens” and apologies for “keeping you from Chris Hayes.” This commentary is supplied by two characters who now frame the narrative: a woman from Reagan’s America (a fixture since “Bright Room” premiered, in 1985, played here by Crystal Lucas-Perry) and Xillah (Jonathan Hadary), a stand-in for the playwright himself in 2019. Rewriting, Kushner’s avatar warns, is dangerous business; he’s been plagued by the show’s formal shortcomings for years. But awareness of these problems can’t absolve him of them, and Oskar Eustis’s direction fails to animate much of the action in Berlin.



Michael Urie shines as Baz, a “homosexual Sunday anarchist” whose cultivated carelessness registers as a human response to the times—particularly when that façade begins to crack. But the protagonist, a disillusioned actress named Agnes (Nikki M. James), like the play itself, amounts to little more than a case study in political inertia.—*Alex Barasch (Through Dec. 15.)*

The Crucible Connelly

In Bedlam’s newest disarrangement of a classic, directed by Eric Tucker (who also plays a smartly understated Reverend Hale), the company takes Arthur Miller’s nightmarish 1953 drama, gives it a good shake, knocks the blocking askew, adds a pinch of Kafka, and stages it partly in the round. The play proves how sturdy it is, emerging from this treatment more terrifying than ever. It begins as if performed through a scrim of irony—an attempt, perhaps, to lighten Miller’s sometimes heavy hand. But this production’s fearsome momentum kicks in as soon as John and Elizabeth Proctor come to the fore, in powerhouse performances by Ryan Quinn and Susannah Millonzi. Miller intended the play as an obvious excoriation of McCarthyism, and Tucker doesn’t force any revisionist allegory, letting its latest dispiriting echoes speak for themselves.—*Rollo Romig (Through Dec. 29.)*

Fefu and Her Friends Polonsky Shakespeare Center

Fefu (Amelia Workman), perhaps the most famous creation of the great and recently deceased playwright María Irene Fornés, plays a game that unsettles her friends: she shoots

a gun in her offstage husband’s direction, unsure as to whether there’s a real bullet in the clip. This revival, directed festively, and with menace, by Lileana Blain-Cruz, for Theatre for a New Audience, takes the danger of that moment and spreads it out, making it permeate the whole haunted-feeling show. Workman plays Fefu—who’s hosting her friends, all women, for an eventful afternoon—with a trickster’s glint in her eye. Brittany Bradford is brilliantly troubled as Julia, who’s got a secret whose import only Fefu can begin to comprehend. This masterwork’s great set piece—an immersive second act that takes the audience through four separate rooms in Fefu’s house—is handled in dancery fashion by Blain-Cruz and the scenic director Adam Rigg, who make these women’s lives ring outward in monumental fashion but also, uncannily, miniaturize them, fitting them into an awful doll house.—*Vinson Cunningham (Through Dec. 8.)*

The Inheritance Ethel Barrymore

Matthew Lopez’s audacious and highly entertaining play in two parts (seven hours total, directed by Stephen Daldry) is based on E. M. Forster’s 1910 masterpiece, “Howards End.” Forster himself, here called Morgan (Paul Hilton), is a kind of spiritual godfather who helps tell the story of the wild, impulsive writer Toby Darling (Andrew Burnap) and his stable, openhearted boyfriend, Eric Glass (Kyle Soller), who live in a rent-controlled apartment in New York. They befriend an older couple, the real-estate magnate Henry Wilcox (John Benjamin Hickey) and Walter Poole (Hilton again), who, at the height of the AIDS epidemic, bought a house upstate where Walter cared for friends as they died. The theme of cultural transmission between the demolished older generation and the thriving younger one is everywhere in the play; the first part ends with a wonderfully moving piece of stage magic, a communion of the living and the dead. Regrettably, in the second, Lopez’s fleet comic tone turns maudlin and preachy as he doles out tragedy, followed by a redemption that too neatly coddles his audience’s point of view.—*Alexandra Schwartz (Reviewed in our issue of 12/2/19.) (Open run.)*

Measure for Measure Public

This pared-down production of Shakespeare’s morality dramedy, directed by L. A. Williams for the Public Theatre’s Mobile Unit, attempts to solve the tonal challenge of the problem play by favoring the comedy over the drama. It’s 1979 in New Orleans, and a hypocritical authoritarian named Angelo (Adrian Kiser) asks a chaste woman, Isabella (Jasmine Batchelor), to sacrifice her honor in order to save her brother from a bogus sentencing. Williams’s casting of all black women presents a counterpoint to the flimsy Madonna-whore dichotomy of the female characters, but the production doesn’t fully contend with the nuances of how such a choice reframes the play’s gender politics and its connections to the #MeToo movement. Batchelor capably delivers Isabella’s

self-righteous monologues but otherwise feels stiff; Toccarra Cash nearly steals the show with her gossipy, troublemaking Lucio. Ultimately, the cuts and adjustments don't justify themselves, and the humor (crotch gestures abound) remains unremarkably juvenile.—*Maya Phillips (Through Dec. 8.)*

The Young Man from Atlanta Pershing Square Signature Center

Horton Foote loved his characters, no matter how foolish or pigheaded they could be. Take, for instance, Will (Aidan Quinn) and Lily Dale Kidder (Kristine Nielsen), the couple at the heart of this Pulitzer Prize-winning drama, which was spun off from the playwright's "The Orphans' Home Cycle." They are torn apart by the memory of their late son, Bill, and disagree not just about how he died—accident or suicide—but about Bill's relationship with his roommate, who drives a wedge between Lily Dale and Will but is never seen. Nielsen and Quinn are simply wonderful as people forced to confront new financial hardships while dealing with a grief that's complicated by a refusal to face certain truths. As usual, the experienced Foote whisperer Michael Wilson, directing at Signature Theatre, expertly mines awkward moments and seemingly casual exchanges in a sterling example of classic, unfussy style done right.—*Elisabeth Vincentelli (Through Dec. 15.)*

DANCE

Tess Dworman The Chocolate Factory

An intriguingly off-kilter performer in works by Tere O'Connor, Juliana May, and others, Dworman tends to push oddball comedy even further in her own pieces. "A Child Retires" is a kind of memoir or retrospective, looking back on a 2011 work in which she pulled objects out of a tote bag. But it's also fiction and standup, with Irish step dancing, Beach Boys outtakes, and a cast of four.—*Brian Seibert (Dec. 4-7.)*

Kyle Marshall Choreography BAM Fisher

As a young black dancer who has performed mainly in the companies of white choreographers (Doug Elkins, Trisha Brown), Marshall has accumulated many observations and ideas about how black bodies are perceived. Some of those insights can be found in "Colored," an elegant and enigmatic but also intensely kinetic trio that won him attention and a Bessie award. For his company's BAM debut, Marshall pairs that 2016 piece with "A.D.," a new work in which he explores Christian iconography with a critical eye.—*B.S. (Dec. 4-7.)*

Alvin Ailey City Center

For the first time in its history, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre has a resident cho-

reographer other than its late founder: the beloved star dancer Jamar Roberts. Following up on the promise shown in his first company work, "Members Don't Get Weary," he offers "Ode," a grieving response to gun violence, set to a challenging, calm-then-chaotic free-jazz recording by Don Pullen. The other world premiere of the season is by the veteran Seattle-based choreographer Donald Byrd. In "Greenwood," his subject is also violence: the destruction of the thriving African-American district of Tulsa, Oklahoma, by a white mob, in 1921.—*B.S. (Dec. 4-8 and Dec. 10. Through Jan. 5.)*

Michela Marino Lerman Whitney Museum

For a jazz pianist to be the subject of an exhibition at the Whitney Museum is out of the ordinary; for that pianist to invite a band led by a tap dancer to perform in it is even more unusual. But Jason Moran's exhibition is, in part, concerned with the spaces and the people of jazz history, a series of musical movements that a tap dancer can conjure. Lerman, an expert improviser, has earned a place in the jazz world, performing with Mwenso & the Shakes, among other musical groups. Her own band, the Love

Movement, spreads warmth with high musicianship and a welcoming vibe.—*B.S. (Dec. 6-7.)*

"The Owl and the Pussycat" Martha Graham Studio Theatre

Not to be outdone (see "Peter & the Wolf"), Graham 2, the Martha Graham Dance Company's junior ensemble, will also put on a chamber work based on a charming tale about animals. "The Owl and the Pussycat," inspired by a nonsense rhyme of the same name by the Victorian poet Edward Lear, is a rarity, a seldom performed Graham piece with more lightness than drama. At its premiere, in 1978, the text was delivered by none other than Liza Minnelli; this time, the former Graham dancer Oliver Tobin will do the honors.—*Marina Harss (Dec. 7.)*

"Peter & the Wolf" Guggenheim Museum

In 1936, Serge Prokofiev had a novel idea for how to introduce young people to the instruments of the orchestra—much as Benjamin Britten would a decade later—while telling a lively story through music. His "Peter and the Wolf" is a cautionary tale about a young

CONTEMPORARY DANCE



The choreographer **Pam Tanowitz** has been having a breakout year, debuting works for New York City Ballet, the Royal Ballet, and the august companies of Martha Graham and Paul Taylor. All those pieces have been smart, witty, and inventive, as is typical for Tanowitz, but none are quite as wonderful as her creations for her own dancers. Take "New Work for Goldberg Variations." Made in 2017 and now receiving its New York debut, at the Joyce Theatre, Dec. 10-15, it's a collaboration with the pianist Simone Dinnerstein, who plays Bach's mammoth set of variations onstage, barefoot, with warmth and freedom. Those qualities inflect the dance, even as Tanowitz responds to Bach's formal complexity with her own intricacy, mirroring and swerving from the music's structure in unpredictable, delightful ways. Add to that a movement vocabulary that oscillates between plain and eccentric, and the result is a rendering of a notoriously hefty masterpiece that feels relaxed, spontaneous, buoyant.—*Brian Seibert*



In the course of Roulette's evolution, from its humble beginnings in a Tribeca loft, in 1978, to its present home in Brooklyn, the venue has become one of New York City's most steadfast bastions of experimental music; there's so much going on this week that you scarcely need to look elsewhere for aural intrigue or edification. On Dec. 5, the excellent **Momenta Quartet** collaborates with the composers Elizabeth Brown and Frances White in pieces that draw on Japanese folk music, Persian poetry, and a W. G. Sebald novel. The following night celebrates **Sylvano Bussotti**, a trailblazing Italian avant-garde composer and queer activist; **Gamelan Kusuma Laras**, a group that specializes in courtly Javanese repertoire, performs on Saturday. On Dec. 9, the **Anagram Ensemble** introduces "I Looked at the Eclipse," a new opera by James Ilgenfritz and Sarah Krasnow which incorporates improvisation and video, and, on Dec. 10, **Judith Berkson**, a distinctive composer, vocalist, and cantor, presents new music with the protean ensemble **Ordinary Affects**.—*Steve Smith*

boy who, despite the counsel of his grouchy grandfather, wanders out into a meadow, where he meets various animals, including a hungry wolf. Each animal's essence is expressed by an instrument: the bird by a flute, the cat by a clarinet, and the unfortunate duck by an oboe. Each holiday season, "Works & Process" presents this colorful little piece at the Guggenheim, narrated by Isaac Mizrahi, played by Ensemble Signal, and cleverly choreographed by John Heginbotham. It's great for kids.—*M.H. (Dec. 7-8 and Dec. 13-15.)*

CLASSICAL MUSIC

Pretty Yende Zankel Hall

The South African soprano Pretty Yende's program with the pianist James Baillieu has the hallmarks of an opera singer's recital. There are works by the Italian melodist Tosti—a favorite of Pavarotti—and the bel-canto hitmaker Donizetti, including an alternate aria from the French version of his "Lucia di

Lammermoor." Gratifying pieces by recital mainstays like Schumann and Richard Strauss get their due, and Yende sends the audience home with the showy czardas from Johann Strauss, Jr.'s "Die Fledermaus."—*Oussama Zahr (Dec. 4 at 7:30.)*

"Amahl and the Night Visitors" Church of the Holy Apostles

In On Site Opera's revival of Eric Einhorn's heart-stirring production of Menotti's Nativity opera, "Amahl and the Night Visitors," the three wise men, looking dishevelled and pushing carts, show up at the Holy Apostles Soup Kitchen, in Chelsea. The staging is vague on whether they are actually en route to greet the son of God, but, when the young Amahl's disability is miraculously healed at the end, the point seems to be that divinity can crop up where you least expect it. Aundi Marie Moore reprises her emotional performance as Amahl's mother, and the show's chorus is made up of professional singers and people who have experienced homelessness; Geoffrey McDonald conducts.—*O.Z. (Dec. 4-8 at various times.)*

"Der Freischütz"

Baruch Performing Arts Center

Heartbeat Opera, with its mission to radically reimagine the operatic canon, transplants Carl Maria von Weber's thoroughly German work "Der Freischütz" to the contemporary United States. "Freischütz," based on a folk story set in the Bohemian Forest, tells of a marksman who makes a deal with the Devil to improve his accuracy. The director Louisa Proske promises a commentary on American gun culture in her adaptation, which uses English-language dialogue. Heartbeat's secret weapon, though, may well be the chamber orchestrations of its efficient co-music director and arranger Daniel Schlosberg, who leads members of Cantata Profana and an alternating cast of singers in Weber's moody score.—*O.Z. (Dec. 4-14 at 8 and Dec. 15 at 3.)*

New York Philharmonic

David Geffen Hall

Next year marks Beethoven's two-hundred-and-fiftieth birthday, and the celebrations have already begun. Here, a program conducted by Jaap van Zweden starts with the composer's Second Symphony and ends with his Fourth Piano Concerto, with Yefim Bronfman at the keyboard. But, for many listeners, the main attraction is the local premiere of "Music for Ensemble and Orchestra," the first symphonic work Steve Reich has composed in more than three decades. After the final performance, Reich curates an after-hours "Nightcap" event in the Kaplan Penthouse (Dec. 7 at 10:30).—*Steve Smith (Dec. 5 at 7:30, Dec. 6 at 11 A.M., and Dec. 7 at 8.)*

Johnny Gandelsman

Bargemusic

When you're a violinist who has mastered and recorded a personal interpretation of Bach's foundational sonatas and partitas, a question arises: What next? Johnny Gandelsman, an unconventional virtuoso known for his work with the Silk Road Project and Brooklyn Rider, opts for a path less travelled. In two Bargemusic recitals, he appropriates and adapts the composer's equally monumental Suites for Solo Cello.—*S.S. (Dec. 6 at 7 and Dec. 8 at 4.)*

Blackbox Ensemble

Spectrum

Blackbox Ensemble, an ambitious new-music group established just over a year ago, contemplates a provocative premise with its latest concert program, "New Geometry." Through works by Frederic Rzewski, Anna Thorvaldsdottir, inti figgis-vizueta, and Katherine Balch, the ensemble explores how musical form can represent narrative structure, political discourse, and other kinds of social interaction.—*S.S. (Dec. 7 at 7.)*

Carolyn Widmann

92nd Street Y

Kurt Weill's Weimar-era concerto for violin and wind ensemble delivers the requisite fireworks, but its pervasive irony unsettles the form's clichés. (If there's another concerto where the

soloist goes waltzing with a xylophone, the public deserves to know.) Carolin Widmann, whose advocacy for modern and contemporary music is grounded in deeply persuasive playing, brings the piece to the L.A. Philharmonic next year, but this performance, with the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, presents a chance to see her up close. The orchestra buffers Weill with two reassuring pieces by Mozart: his sociable “Gran Partita” Serenade and Jan Wendt’s key-clacking woodwind transcription of the “Marriage of Figaro” overture.—*F.M. (Dec. 7 at 8.)*

ART

“Artist’s Choice: Amy Sillman” Museum of Modern Art

Prunella Clough (1919-99), a superbly weird British modernist who deserves to be better known, was fond of a quote by Édouard Manet: “Painting is like throwing oneself into the sea to learn to swim.” Looking at art can be like that, too—a crash course and a full-body experience. Visitors to the new MOMA can take that kind of plunge in “The Shape of Shape,” a big show in a small space filled with seventy-one paintings, sculptures, photographs, drawings, and prints from the museum’s collection, all chosen by the voraciously smart Amy Sillman, a superbly weird painter herself. (She contributes a blood-red wall work to the show, equal parts shadow and viscera.) Sillman chose the catchall concept of shape because it’s off the grid—less theorized than, say, color or systems. The installation, which proceeds in an obstreperous progression of four rows on three walls, covers more than a century, from 1890 to 2017, but it eschews chronology in favor of dream logic and gut instinct. Marquee names (Calder, Duchamp, Matisse, Rodin), artists’ artists (Forrest Bess, Prunella Clough, Arthur Dove, Christina Ramberg), and the frankly obscure (the Croatian sculptor Ivan Kožarić) all become firsts among equals.—*Andrea K. Scott*

“Theater of Operations: The Gulf Wars, 1991-2011” MOMA PS1

Might art afford new things to know and new ways to feel about matters that are so dismaying and depressing that they hobble the brain and lock down the heart? Not really. That’s the sour news in this museum-wide show of more than two hundred and fifty contemporary works, which is complicated by tangential sensations of grotesquerie and elegance, fury and poignance, and, perhaps, philosophical insight. Most informative are the ruggedly handmade *dafatir* (notebooks) by Iraqi artists, whose struggle to make art becomes a subject in itself. “She/He Has No Picture,” from 2019, by the superb painter Hanaa Malallah (who immigrated to the U.K. in 2006) amplifies the *dafatir* aesthetic in a wall-filling array of portraits on scorched canvas, depicting some of the more than four hundred civilians who were killed, in 1991, in an air-raid shelter by a U.S. “bunker buster” bomb. Such raw authenticity clashes with the comfortable sophistication of works by European and American artists who respond far more to media reportage of the wars than to the wars themselves. Exceptions include the British graphic artist Sue Coe, who finds focus

for her classic Expressionism and her lifelong sorrow and anger at human barbarities. But, for the most part, a sort of clammy vicariousness reigns.—*Peter Schjeldahl (Through March 1.)*

Wilder Alison / Esteban Jefferson White Columns

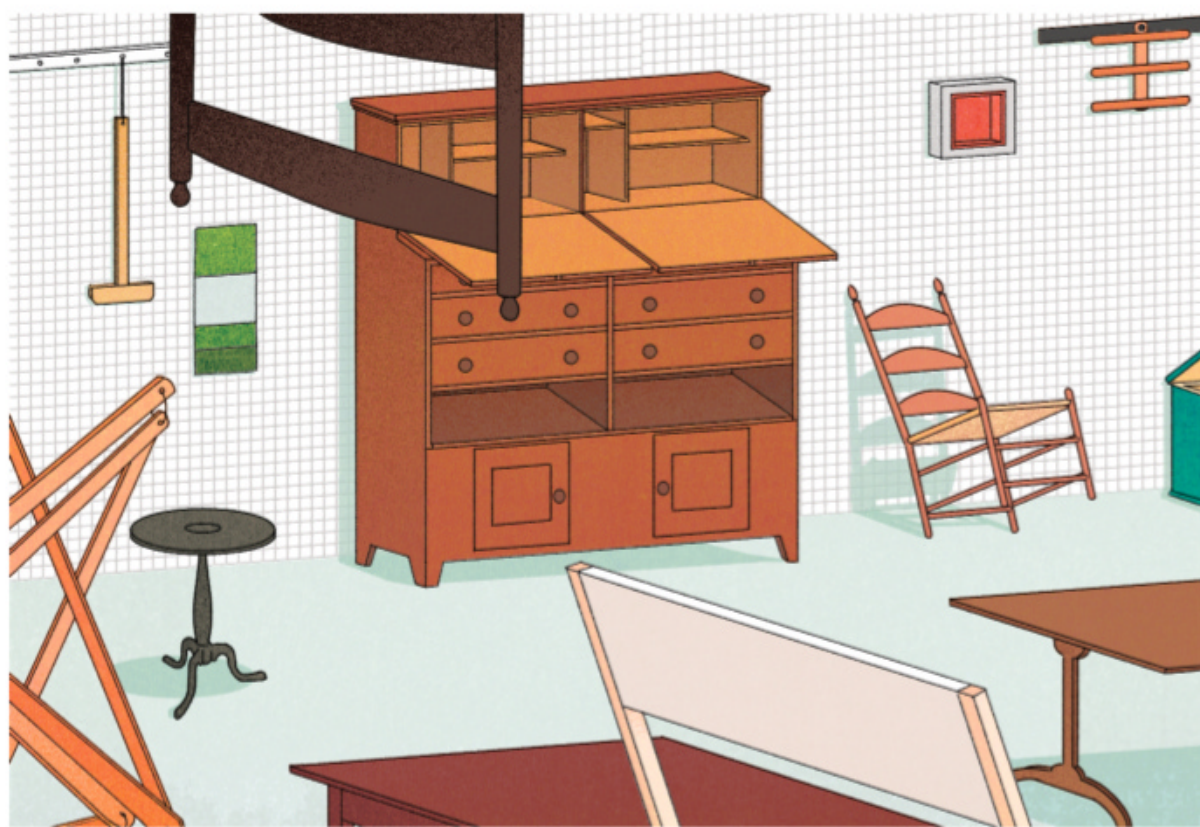
CHELSEA Neither of these conceptually complex painting shows skimps on visual pleasure. Alison’s vibrant suite of sewn, dyed-wool abstractions is inspired by “The Lesbian Body,” a novel, from 1973, by the French theorist Monique Wittig; the diagonal seams of the artist’s geometric compositions echo the author’s radical use of slashes. Clouds of color bleed into Alison’s matte surfaces, serving as lush counterpoints to her precise patchworks. Jefferson’s oneiric canvases are also studies in contrast: realist articulations punctuate otherwise washy, sepia-toned scenes of the Petit Palais museum, in Paris. His particular focus is on two busts of unidentified African subjects (both likely made in the late nineteenth century) that are situated in the museum’s lobby. Rendering the sculptures hyper-visible amid faded signage and blurry ticket-counter activity, Jefferson strikes a melancholy, poetic tone as he

questions colonialist conventions of museum display.—*Johanna Fateman (Through Jan. 11.)*

Roger Brown Venus Over Manhattan

UPTOWN Brown, who died in 1997, was associated with the Chicago Imagists—an eccentric cohort of Pop-surrealist painters who emerged in the nineteen-sixties—but his fire-and-brimstone themes likely derive from his upbringing in Bible Belt Alabama. In many of the arresting canvases in this career-spanning show, dark skies roil with rhythmic patterns, as disaster strikes strange landscapes below. A wonderful group of small paintings, all from 1968, reveal the influence of film noir. The square compositions depict Art Deco theatre interiors, with audience members seen in silhouette; in one, the discovery of a body seems to flicker onscreen. There’s an undeniably playful aspect to Brown’s work, although his gloomy graphic sensibility is also a vehicle for social critique. Take “Acid Rain,” from 1984, a stark monochrome punctuated by black, leafless trees, or “Sarajevo the Serbian Way,” from 1994, in which the bloody siege referenced in the title is rendered as a comic-book

AT THE GALLERIES



What does an apple peeler have in common with an Agnes Martin painting? Find out in “**Concerning Superfluities,**” a fascinating, if overstuffed, exhibition at the Essex Street gallery (through Dec. 22), organized by the canny gallerist Maxwell Graham with John Keith Russel Antiques. Pieces by twelve contemporary artists hum on the same frequency as three dozen sublimely utilitarian objects, made by Shakers in the nineteenth century. Martin’s one-foot-square black-and-white study in sacred geometry, from 1959, is the show’s earliest art piece; its most recent are two pithy inkjet-on-linen grids by Wade Guyton, from 2019. The apple peeler—carved from pine, birch, and maple, circa 1850, and a ringer for a mini Brancusi—has pride of place in the front window. Everything makes a persuasive case for the Shaker ideal of formal frugality and for the idea that, as Martin simply put it, “Beauty is the mystery of life.”—*Andrea K. Scott*

cataclysm, deftly highlighting the illusory aspect of distant horror.—*J.F. (Through Jan. 12.)*

Karen Kilimnik

303 Gallery

CHELSEA In fresh, salon-style arrangements of new and old works, Kilimnik continues her brilliant, thirty-year-long tradition of stubborn amateurism and faux naïveté—the longing of the wannabe “horse girl,” and the poignant, comic channelling of similar aspirations into unpolished, beautiful, and often semi-appropriated creations. The artist’s past interest in celebrity culture—Kate Moss was a frequent early subject—has been largely overtaken by fantasies of an imagined European aristocratic past, drawn from all manner of visual artifacts. Standouts among these scattered vignettes—which incorporate photographs, collages, and videos, in addition to winsome paintings—include small, printed canvases adorned with Swarovski crystals. (A landscape with grazing cows in Delftware blue and a portrait of a hunting dog are notable charmers.) A trio of bejewelled architectural models (the Louvre, the Eiffel Tower, and the Tower of

Pisa) completes Kilimnik’s irresistibly make-shift fairy-tale vision.—*J.F. (Through Dec. 20.)*

MOVIES

Kind Hearts and Coronets

The return of Robert Hamer’s 1949 film to the big screen is always welcome. The movie—starring Dennis Price as an Edwardian gentleman who calmly murders his way to a dukedom, dispatching the relatives who stand in his way—remains unflinchingly funny. Many of the killings occur before our eyes, yet mysteries linger, ones that are deeper than anything arising from the plot. Given the cynicism of Hamer’s misanthropic hero, why should the result be so joyful to watch? And how does Alec Guinness play eight separate roles, yet come across as a paragon of self-effacement? No movie is more suavely literate or more insanely quotable, yet never do we feel that we are merely watching a filmed script; the action is lively, crisp, and surprisingly sensual. With each viewing, the supportive presence of Joan

Greenwood—and her astonishing hats—comes further to the fore.—*Anthony Lane (Reviewed in our issue of 12/2/19.) (In limited release.)*

Knives Out

Rian Johnson comes down to earth, in style, after directing “Star Wars: Episode VIII—The Last Jedi” (2017). Instead of galactic empires, we have one tight-knit American family, though that knitting is all snarled up. Its elderly patriarch, a successful author named Harlan Thrombey (Christopher Plummer), has been found dead, with his throat slit, and Benoit Blanc (Daniel Craig), a swaggering Southern detective, is hired to uncover what happened. Johnson obeys the rules of the murder mystery while reserving the right to make fun of them, and, in the process, to incriminate most of his characters—not as killers, necessarily, but as selfish souls. The tale is set in a dark and overdecorated mansion, and the cast, too, leans comically close to excess. With Michael Shannon, Jamie Lee Curtis, Don Johnson, Chris Evans, and Toni Collette, plus Ana de Armas, as Harlan’s devoted nurse.—*A.L. (12/2/19) (In wide release.)*

Little Caesar

Edward G. Robinson stars in this 1931 crime drama as Caesar Enrico Bandello, a small-time hoodlum who dreams of the big time and crashes the Chicago rackets; he gleefully captures the tough-talking mobster’s vulgar preening and sneering pugnacity. Meanwhile, Mervyn Le-Roy’s coldly efficient direction—owing less to his own artistry than to the constraints of sound recording in its early years—imposes a static rigor on the action and lends the actor’s diction and gestures a sculptural, granitic force. The terse, epigrammatic narrative offers every hardboiled cliché in its naïve original form, including the gangster who falls in love and wants to go straight (Douglas Fairbanks, Jr.), the sarcastic Irish police officer (Thomas Jackson), the prodigal gangland banquet, and the operatic death throes. The psychosexual subtexts of later gangster movies are there, too, as when Little Caesar draws his slight, furtive cohort Otero (George E. Stone) onto his bed for a meaningful tête-à-tête.—*Richard Brody (MOMA, Dec. 10, and streaming.)*

Marriage Story

Noah Baumbach’s new film stars Adam Driver as Charlie, a successful theatre director who lives in New York with his actress wife, Nicole (Scarlett Johansson), and their eight-year-old son, Henry (Azhy Robertson). Nicole and Henry go to Los Angeles, where she is appearing in a pilot for a TV show, and never really come back; the story is as much a battle of the cities as it is a clash of characters. Nicole, while staying with her mother (Julie Hagerty), files for divorce and hires Nora Fanshaw (Laura Dern) to fight her case. Charlie fights back with lawyers of his own, though it’s a conflict that neither party wanted in the first place; as a vision of good souls enmeshed in legal machinery and debased by the whole experience, the movie—fervid and funny though it is—often sinks the heart. With Ray Liotta, Alan Alda, and Merritt Wever.—*A.L. (11/11/19) (In limited release and on Netflix.)*

IN REVIVAL



One of the year’s major revivals, of the Wisconsin-born director Joseph Losey’s 1976 French drama, “Monsieur Klein,” has its roots in the McCarthy era. Losey, a leading Hollywood filmmaker of the postwar years, was blacklisted in 1951 and left the United States for exile in Europe. His final studio movie, “**The Big Night**,” a rarely screened film noir, is one of many obscure gems streaming on Amazon Prime; it displays the sort of scathing critique of American society that, at the time of its release, led to trouble. John Barrymore, Jr., stars as George, a Los Angeles teen-ager who sees his father (Preston Foster), a bartender, brutally beaten by a well-known sportswriter (Howard St. John); George steals his father’s gun and decides to get revenge. The young man’s ramble through L.A.’s seamy night life reveals the period’s rank ideological foundations—an undercurrent of ethnic and racial hatred and an entrenched mythology of masculinity that gives rise to secrets, lies, and violence. Losey’s nerve-jangling style matches the subject: his images’ crisscrossing and striated lines evoke George’s unresolved tangle of conscience and identity.—*Richard Brody*

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TABLES FOR TWO

Angel Indian

7414 37th Rd., Queens

On a recent Sunday at Angel Indian, a new, mostly Punjabi restaurant in Jackson Heights, where the bill of fare happens to be meat-free, an epicure I had brought along for lunch declared that he didn't much care for vegetarian Indian food. An hour and a half-dozen dishes later, I watched him jump up from the table to chase down a pair of women who had studied the menu taped to the front door before walking away, so he could urge them to return.

Angel is a welcome entry into the classic genre of humble, family-run restaurants that don't look like much but offer meals that inspire passionate allegiance. Before opening his own place, the chef, Amrit Pal Singh, cooked at two of the city's best and most stylish Indian restaurants—Rahi, in Manhattan, and Adda, in Long Island City (they share an owner). Though Angel has little in common with those establishments aesthetically, its food is on par with theirs.

For a dramatic start, order the dahi batata puri, a chaat, popular all over India, that looks something like a

cluster of cartoon dinosaur eggs. Each crisp, fragile orb, made of a fried dough known as puri (or, sometimes, poori), is filled with aromatic mashed potato and dollops of tamarind chutney, cilantro chutney, and sweetened yogurt, then showered in sev (tiny shards of fried chickpea noodles) and a fine dusting of chili powder.

The kale pakoda is another showstopper, featuring leaves of the curly brassica fried until they're as translucent as stained glass, encased in chickpea batter, and fried again, until they're sharply crunchy. A stack of them, topped with festive zigzags of chutneys and yogurt, cuts a bit like a mille-feuille. A third appetizer, called Paneer PB 35 (a reference to the vehicle registration code for Singh's home town of Pathankot, in India's Punjab state), is less visually arresting than the pakoda but just as memorable: cubes of excellent house-made paneer—creamy, salty, curdy but firm, without a hint of squeak—tossed in a jammy, spicy mix of tomato, onion, green pepper, and long peels of fresh ginger. Sprinkled with chopped cilantro, it veers into Indo-Chinese territory.

That dish is just one among the restaurant's impressively wide array of paneer applications. There are standards like saag paneer, with spinach, and matar paneer, with green peas, but also less ubiquitous dishes, like lotus-root kofta, for which paneer is crumbled, mixed with shredded lotus root and freshly ground garam masala, and rolled into balls. These are fried so they're crisp and

golden on the outside but still soft in the middle, then bathed in a luscious fresh-tomato sauce turned pale with copious butter.

Paneer is nestled, too, with rice, carrots, potatoes, onions, and whole spices in a beautiful dum biryani, which releases fragrant steam when you cut into its naan cap, shiny with oil and bright with a few shakes of paprika. If this sounds like a lot of cheese for one meal, fear not: there are plenty of dishes that are more centered on vegetables, including mashed eggplant (baingan bharta), fried okra (bhindi masala), and kidney beans (rajma masala), which are almost creamy in texture. All are complexly layered with flavor and heat and served with fluffy basmati rice flecked with fennel seeds.

Silky tofu can be substituted for paneer in just about any dish, and Singh is happy to make vegan versions of many things. Angel, which is named after Singh's five-year-old daughter, is a warm and accommodating place. On that Sunday afternoon, Singh's wife and her brother darted in and out of the small kitchen, pouring milky masala chai into paper cups and shuttling plastic bowls and plates. Behind the takeout counter, the top of Angel's head was barely visible, barrettes with bows fastened in her hair. We didn't order dessert, but dessert came anyway: tiny ramekins of rice pudding, topped with chopped almonds. The pair of women came back and ordered a chaat to go. (Main courses \$8.99–\$11.99.)

—Hannah Goldfield



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THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT NEXT STEPS

The Monday before Thanksgiving, Adam Schiff, the chair of the House Intelligence Committee, sent a letter to his congressional colleagues saying that, in effect, his work was done. The committee's report on President Trump's almost certainly impeachable dealings with Ukraine would be ready soon after the members returned from the holiday break. Schiff left open the possibility that more materials might "come to light," but he emphasized that the evidence the committee found is "clear and hardly in dispute." The public heard testimony from twelve witnesses, which was, in turn, stirring (Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Vindman's tribute to his immigrant father), gripping (Fiona Hill's realization that the "irregular channel" in Ukraine policy was backed by the President), and absurd (repeated references to A\$AP Rocky). The report will go to the House Judiciary Committee, whose chair, Jerrold Nadler, will gavel open a new set of hearings on Wednesday. Schiff is putting together a neatly wrapped package; the question, as the proceedings move to the next stage, is whether it will be enough.

The answer depends on what the Democrats are trying to achieve. When such discussions get too specific, or too mathematical—with regard to the sixty-seven votes in the Senate that it will take to convict and remove Trump—Democratic legislators invoke such phrases as "constitutional duty" and "judgment of history." Those

are good and, indeed, essential words, but there may be more practical measures of success. If the point is just to get enough Democratic votes in the House to impeach the President, then Schiff and Nadler can probably declare victory. But the Democrats are facing the prospect that, when they take their case to the Senate, only a few Republicans may be willing to even hear them out.

It had seemed possible that the Judiciary Committee would basically serve as a rewrite desk, translating the Intelligence Committee's findings into the legal language of articles of impeachment, then rushing them to the full House, for a vote, and on to the Senate, for a trial. (One concern is that a long trial will keep Democratic senators off the Presidential campaign trail, since they would have to serve in the role of jurors.) Nadler appears to have more than that planned. Last Tuesday, he sent a letter to Trump, asking him to let the committee know if "you and

your counsel plan to attend" the proceedings. Nadler said that the committee would explore the constitutional meaning of impeachment, but he was otherwise vague as to the parameters of the new hearings. How many witnesses will there be? Will charges go beyond the Ukraine imbroglio and perhaps include allegations of obstruction of justice described in the Mueller report? Nadler may not yet know, in part because each day seems to bring another revelation; at this stage, it may be a mistake for Democrats to be too wedded to a strict timetable.

This is particularly true because Schiff does not seem to have won over any Republicans. In fact, Trump's support within the Party is getting louder—and weirder. Last week, Senator John Kennedy argued on Fox News that, if the President believed that someone—namely, Joe Biden—who "happens to be a political rival" was corrupt, then asking the Ukrainians to investigate that person would be "in the national interest." Senator Lindsey Graham is now demanding that the focus be on Biden's son, Hunter, and his connections to a Ukrainian gas company. "I am not going to create a country where only Republicans get investigated," Graham told Fox News. When reporters asked him about those remarks in light of his long friendship with Joe Biden, Graham said, "My conscience is clear." Defending Trump has required Republicans to become increasingly comfortable with the conspiratorial; these days, they barely seem persuadable. But this is not the moment to stop trying; even one Republican vote



for a conviction would shift the historical record.

In the Intelligence Committee, Schiff limited the number of witnesses in order to lay out a coherent story, and he succeeded in doing so. If he had been less disciplined, the Republicans, led by Devin Nunes, the ranking member, and Jim Jordan, might have turned the hearings into a slander-filled *mêlée*. Now, though, the Judiciary Committee can be a little looser, and make meaningful use of the presence of Trump's lawyer, if he sends one. Nadler has a lot of discretion in deciding what to allow. One way to counter the President's complaints about being denied "due process" would be to give him room to make whatever case he has; based on all that we know, this would only expose its weaknesses. (At a rally in Florida on Tuesday night, Trump dismissed the inquiry as "bullshit.") It would be prudent for the committee to do so in

advance of a Senate trial, where Mitch McConnell, the Majority Leader, will determine many of the rules.

At the same time, Republicans' complaints about the process, particularly their not being free to call witnesses, are largely disingenuous; the President has ordered a dozen officials with direct knowledge of the Ukraine matter to stay silent. These include John Bolton, the former national-security adviser; Don McGahn, the former White House counsel; and Mick Mulvaney, the acting chief of staff. Indeed, the Administration has been fighting subpoenas from both the Judiciary and Intelligence Committees. Schiff, in his letter, said that the President would not be allowed to "drag this out for months on end in the courts," and suggested that his stonewalling might, in itself, be an impeachable offense.

But what's going on in the courts is consequential in its own right, and some

judges are moving quickly. Last Monday, the D.C. district-court judge Ketanji Brown Jackson ordered McGahn to appear before the Judiciary Committee, and wrote that her decision also applies broadly, to other officials. She rebuked the Administration's lawyers for trying to argue that "the President wields virtually unchecked power," adding that "Presidents are not kings." The Administration is appealing the decision, and there is no way to know how fast the higher courts may act. These cases have the potential to establish important precedents regarding Presidential power, and there is value in letting them play out. In a series of tweets last week, Trump said that he would "love" to have his aides testify, but he is fighting the subpoenas because "future Presidents should in no way be compromised." He's right about the stakes, if nothing else.

—Amy Davidson Sorkin

BIG BREAK DEPT. THE RAMEN CIRCUIT



For standup comedians, the Netflix special has become the brass ring. Ronny Chieng required ramen to reach his. The day before taping his first comedy set for Netflix (title: "Asian Comedian Destroys America!"), Chieng flew from New York, where he works as a correspondent for "The Daily Show," to Los Angeles, and Ubered straight to Little Tokyo. "I've been trying to check out every ramen place on this street," he said. He wore a crisp white T-shirt and a tweed blazer. He assessed the menu (laminated, slightly sticky) of a bare-bones Japanese restaurant, his preferred cuisine when on the road. "Usually, it's an *izakaya*," he said. "Otherwise, you end up eating American diner food, which—you can't do that."

Like all good millennials, Chieng, who is thirty-four, has a side hustle: food blogging. He's in the process of upgrading his Web site, I'm Ok with Anything (subtitle: "Surrounded by idiots who can't decide where to eat?"), from a static

list of restaurants to a pinchable, annotated map of recommendations.

Chieng mines Internet mores for comedy material. In one show, he chastised people who complain about Facebook ("What makes you think Facebook wants your data? Who are you, Jason Bourne?") and homed in on the most excruciating form of modern-day torture ("Explaining to your mom over the phone how to fix a computer problem when you can't see her screen"). The screen he prefers is his three-year-old



Ronny Chieng

iPhone, a Lilliput in a land of Gullivers. "I just love the size," he said, snapping a photo of his pork *chashu* ramen. "You can do anything with this phone. You can conquer the world. You've got Instagram, Facebook, Twitter. You can get fired from 'S.N.L.' because of this phone."

These are trying times for comedians, and Chieng follows the fallout, as when "Saturday Night Live" fired a newly hired cast member, Shane Gillis, this season, after a video of him mocking Chinese people surfaced on Twitter. "If you want to play with dynamite, you'd better be spot on," Chieng said. "But the idea that you can't joke about a certain thing—as a comedian, you take that as a challenge. There's a lot of stuff that you try that you probably shouldn't say publicly, but the idea of solving that puzzle: how do you take a horrific thing and find the joke in it? Frankly, if you do comedy professionally that's just the way your brain works."

He went on, "Someone is always going to be offended. One of my openers in the special is about how measles is coming back to America. Like, we're bringing back measles! I think that's a funny premise. Someone with measles would probably be, like, 'That's fucked.'"

Chinese by ethnicity, Malaysian by

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birth, Chieng grew up in New Hampshire and Singapore. He studied law and business at the University of Melbourne. “I thought it was a way to make money,” he said. In his final year, he won a campus comedy competition, and started doing standup. “I took the New York bar in 2011 because I thought that was my way to move to New York City,” he said. “I failed.”

In 2013, he performed with Trevor Noah, the host of “The Daily Show,” at a Montreal comedy festival. Two years later, while living in Melbourne, he auditioned for the show. “I wanted to move back to America. Everything here is cutting-edge compared to Singapore or Australia, where everything’s very old-people-focussed: old people making content for old people, old people making content for young people.”

The shine has worn off, somewhat. “I’m biased, but I think the food in Asia kicks America’s ass,” he said. “New York—like, if you have a bodega buffet, that’s not a city that respects food.”

But he appreciates the Netflix model of meritocracy. “Business-wise, it’s a platform that people trust for comedy,” he said. “It has an algorithm that pushes you stuff that you’ll probably like.”

After lunch, a publicist pulled up in an S.U.V.; Chieng was due for a walk-through of the San Fernando Valley theatre where the taping would take place. “It wasn’t as easy as I thought to find an appropriate theatre,” he said. “The visual theme for this special is classic American show biz, and the smaller theatres have a more grungy look.”

The S.U.V. slowed, and Chieng peered out the window. “Damn, it’s in a strip mall!” he said. He looked anxious.

“Yeah, it’s right by that mini Washington monument,” his publicist said, pointing at an obelisk poking up between a sports bar and a Peruvian restaurant.

Chieng hopped out of the car. “We’re going to have to hide the obelisk in the exterior shots,” he said. He frowned at the faux-Greek frieze above the theatre’s entrance (“Hide that, too”), and at the poster below the marquee (“Pure Yanni”). He picked up a flyer with the name of the venue. “Alex Theatre,” he said, nodding. “It’s so, like, *American*.”

—Sheila Marikar

BRAVE NEW WORLD THE UNBANKED



Carlos Acevedo, a teacher at a public high school in the South Bronx, recently invited a group of his former students back for a two-day course in cryptocurrencies. He planned to cover decentralization, blockchain, peer-to-peer networks, and fiat currencies. Each student would then get five dollars, in a form of cryptomoney called Zcash, to spend. “After these two days, you’re going to be the one per cent,” he told the twenty-five young people who had gathered at the South Bronx Business Lab. “You’re going to know more about cryptocurrency and blockchain than ninety-nine per cent of people out there. You have the opportunity to get in on the industry right now.”

Until last month, Acevedo taught English at Morris Academy, in Morrisania, which is in the poorest congressional district in the country. Having read about Bitcoin, he started investing in cryptocurrency in 2014, and he’s been hooked ever since. He views it as a way of helping what he calls “the unbanked,” so he created the Crypto Community Project, with the goal of building a cryptocurrency economy in the South Bronx.

Acevedo, who wore a Zcash T-shirt, reminded the students that they were in the Forty-first Precinct—known as Fort Apache, he explained—which was at one time “the most dangerous precinct in New York City.” Low-income neighborhoods like theirs often lack banks where people can open savings accounts or apply for loans; instead, they rely on pawnshops and check-cashing joints that charge huge fees. Over truck noise on the Bruckner Expressway outside, Acevedo said, “For the first time in history, if you have a phone you can participate in a worldwide economy without the need of any bank.”

Mejreme Musaj, who had braces and wore her long brown hair in a bun on top of her head, raised her hand. “When we first talked about Bitcoin in your class, I thought, *Criminals*,” she said.

Her friend Ashley Perez Camacho, a science major at City College whose nails were painted blue, cut in. “I see it like an ideology, the people taking control,” she said. “But how does this not create chaos? How is this not going to—?”

“Blow up the world?” Acevedo said.

“Let’s say this is the next big thing, instead of Chase and TD Bank,” Musaj said. “Wouldn’t crime rise more?”

“You guys are going heavy,” Acevedo said. “I’m not talking about machine guns on the street. It’s not ‘Mad Max’ out there.” He suggested that they take a break to eat; trays of “Puerto Rican and Italian-Bronx dinner” had been laid out.

They piled paper plates with rice and beans, pernil and chicken parm. “I believe capitalism is built to collapse, and then go back up, collapse, and go back up,” Perez Camacho said. “So how does Bitcoin actually fit into a capitalist system?”

Musaj answered that she wasn’t sure, but that cryptocurrency might come in handy when she wanted to send money to her relatives in Kosovo.

Brandon Gonzalez, who had carefully styled hair and wore torn jeans, said that he had already invested a hundred dollars in Bitcoin but that he knew it was risky. “I don’t have a thousand dollars I can just lose like that,” he said. “I’ve seen Bitcoin go down. It was ten thousand, then down to seven thousand, in an hour. And later it goes back up.”

“I got into Bitcoin at thirteen,” Alexis Ortiz Estrella said. He had a pair of headphones around his neck. He was interested in computers as a kid, and then his father, a landscaper, introduced him to the cryptocurrency Ethereum. “So we invested, like, four dollars, because we didn’t have a lot to invest,” he said.

“What happened?” someone asked.

“Gone,” he said, in two days. “We didn’t realize we could lose it real quick.”

Most of the other kids said that their parents didn’t know that they were dabbling in cryptocurrencies. “My mother will think I’m wasting my money,” a girl named Teshura Francis said. “That I’m, like, throwing it away.”

“I talked to my mom,” a bespectacled boy named José Pimienta added. “Even with trading stocks, she’ll tell me, ‘No, no, no!’ She don’t really know—she don’t understand it.”

After dinner, Acevedo was planning

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to explain the concept of digital wallets, and there would be a presentation by representatives of Gemini, the cryptocurrency exchange founded by Cameron and Tyler Winklevoss.

"Nobody tells us, 'You could actually do this,'" Perez Camacho said. "Having someone tell us, 'This is how the real world works'—I like that. You're at a young age, in high school. I appreciate that a lot. I know more than my mom."

—Sheelah Kolhatkar

LONDON POSTCARD BOOKS ON TAP



Not long before Nancy Mitford published "The Pursuit of Love" ("Life is sometimes sad and often dull, but there are currants in the cake, and here is one of them"), she worked in a bookshop called Heywood Hill, in the Mayfair neighborhood of London. Her friends—Evelyn Waugh and Patrick Leigh Fermor, among others—would come by and talk to her as she sold books. "I have only ever read one book in my life, and that is *White Fang*. It's so frightfully good I've never bothered to read another," she once wrote, describing one of her character's literary tastes. Later, in an essay, she remarked, "Most

people like reading about what they already know—there is even a public for yesterday's weather."

The other day, Nicky Dunne, Heywood's director and executive chairman, was standing outside the shop, near a plaque bearing Mitford's name and the dates she worked there: 1942-1945. Dunne has tousled Hugh Grant hair, and was dressed in an aqua blazer and a matching knit tie. "I like to think she was sort of honing her writing skills while working in the shop," he said, of Mitford. He acknowledged another plaque, beneath Mitford's, declaring Heywood the official booksellers to the Queen. "I feel like we're part of London's literary ecology, in a small way. Somebody said that the place is full of ghosts, literary ones."

Inside, down a narrow flight of stairs, past the shop floor and a rare-books room, which contains such items as Charles Dickens's hip flask, are the cramped book-lined offices of Heywood's subscription service, A Year in Books, a kind of bacon-of-the-month club for readers. Each year, the five members of the subscription team read some six hundred books; each month, they send each subscriber a book based on their preferences (of the "yesterday's weather" variety, or otherwise). Tacked to the wall was a map of the world dotted with pins showing where the books are sent: the U.K., the U.S., Australia, Singapore. "It's a good visual," Camille Van de Velde, the head of subscriptions,

said. She wore a black sweater and thick round glasses. Her colleagues Faye Keegan (glasses, floral sweater) and Eleanor Franzén (topknot, striped sweater) sat next to her at a row of computers.

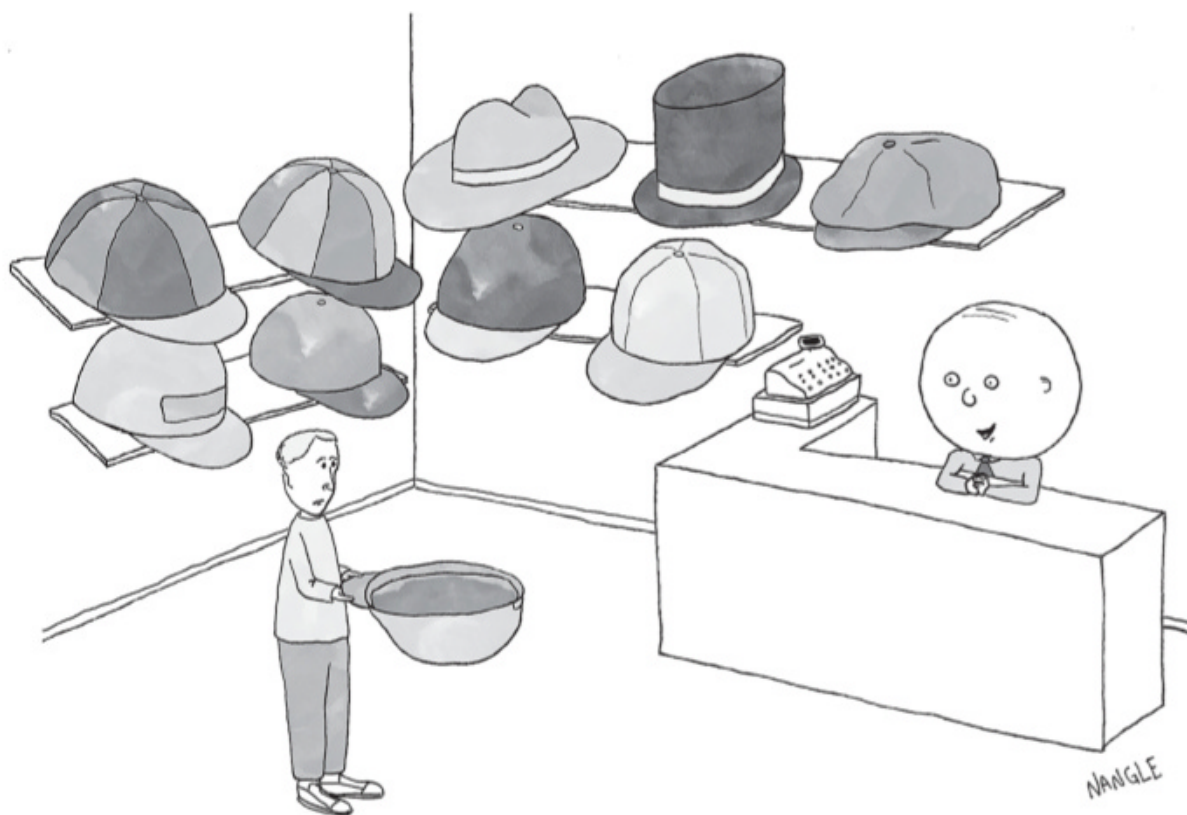
Each subscription begins with a reading consultation. "Some people are really prepared and go, 'I like *this* and *this* and *this*,'" Van de Velde said. "Others need a bit more time to get in the groove." The relationship can quickly turn personal. "I talk to some of mine probably monthly by e-mail," Franzén said. Keegan picked up a packet from her desk. "One came to see me today, and he brought me this seaweed," she said. "We're not selling magic pills," Franzén added, "but when you get it right for someone it does feel like magic."

What would they send to a reader recently heartbroken? "Maybe David Nicholls's *Sweet Sorrow*?" Franzén suggested. Or "The Pisces," by Melissa Broder, Keegan added. How about a woman contemplating motherhood? "Sight," by Jessie Greengrass, or "Motherhood," by Sheila Heti. Someone changing careers? "The Outrun," by Amy Liptrot, or "even 'Bleaker House,'" by Nell Stevens. Someone lonely? "The Lonely City," by Olivia Laing. "It also makes me think of Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*," but that's really leaning into the loneliness," Keegan said.

Camille Aveni, an executive assistant who lives in Oak Ridge, New Jersey, received a subscription as a birthday gift. "Every time that box shows up with that beautiful blue ribbon and that monthly bookmark, I feel like Anne Bancroft," in the film "84 Charing Cross Road," she said. Recently, Aveni, whose tastes skew toward generational novels, received a biography of the war reporter Marie Colvin. "If you had asked me, I would have said no, yet what a brilliant book," she said. Of her bookseller, she added, "I feel like she knows what I need before I do."

Ashley Newton, an executive at Universal Music Group, remembered the first time he passed Heywood. "It looked like someone had pressed the Pause button in 1930," he said. The subscription has turned him on to Kate Atkinson, Anthony Quinn, and Mick Herron.

Mariadela Villegas, a law student, was on Instagram when she saw an ad for a lifetime of books from Heywood. She



"Nope—just the one size."

entered the contest by submitting a paragraph about a favorite book. Since then, she has received books on American diplomacy, a murdered socialite, and a biography of Tsar Nicholas II. “She is so on point,” she said, of her bookseller.

Which book did she pick for the contest? “I wrote about ‘Fahrenheit 451,’” she said, for its depiction of a world in which books are banned and only a few people remember them. She said, “I would lie awake at night and think, No more ‘Romeo and Juliet’—imagine that!”

—Anna Russell

NEWCOMERS BALLS IN THE AIR



When the curtain rose on Philip Glass’s opera “Akhnaten” last month, Sean Gandini was sitting twenty feet above the Metropolitan Opera’s stage, dressed as a walrus-headed god. Along with a cast that included the countertenor Anthony Roth Costanzo, Gandini was about to engage in a complex ritual: resurrecting the titular pharaoh (a sun-worshipping iconoclast best known as Tutankhamun’s father) through several hours of minimalist music and high-intensity juggling.

“Some people who aren’t used to seeing juggling think that there’s a lot of it in the show,” Gandini said two weeks later, in a bar near the Tony Dapolito Recreation Center, in Greenwich Village. “There is a lot—there are twelve jugglers—but it’s quite pared down, quite un-tricksy.” Gandini, who has curly gray hair and a garrulous enthusiasm, grew up in Havana, where his Irish mother and his Italian father—Communists who met in an anarchist club in Geneva—moved when he was four. “It was the late sixties,” he said. “They thought that there was this better world.” In elementary school, a teacher asked Gandini’s class to write about what they wanted to be when they grew up. “People were, like, ‘I want to be the first Soviet astronaut,’” he said. “I wrote that I wanted to be a clown and make everybody laugh.”

In choreographing “Akhnaten,” Gandini collaborated with his wife, Kati

Ylä-Hokkala, who is also in the show, taking inspiration from a wall painting of ancient Egyptian entertainers. At one point in the opera, Gandini’s jugglers have fifty-nine balls in the air, and during a battle scene silver clubs flash across the stage. “I think at first Philip saw it as decorative,” he said, of the composer. “But after seeing Kati demonstrating juggling on these rhythms, he said, ‘It’s exactly like the music, rhythmically—it makes perfect sense.’”

When Ylä-Hokkala first saw Gandini, juggling on the street in Covent Garden, in the nineteen-eighties, she was hooked. “I was twenty,” she said. “I did gymnastics when I was little, in Finland, but Sean was the first juggler I ever saw.” She turned out to be his technical match—they can both keep seven balls aloft, though Gandini could manage nine when he was younger—and his artistic foil.

“Kati is a perfect thrower,” Gandini said. “She’ll throw and never need to move. Whereas I’m more of a catcher.”

Ylä-Hokkala raised an eyebrow. “You’re in a better situation,” she said. “I expect perfect throws, so if I don’t get them I can drop, whereas you can catch anything.”

The couple had come downtown to visit the Carmine Street Jugglers, an amateur group that meets every Thursday at a municipal gym. When not on tour, they live in Clapton, in East London; they’re now renting a place in Harlem. This month, they’ll be in New Jersey, at Peak Performances, opening a run of their show “Spring,” which mixes circus skills and contemporary dance. (They count, among their influences, the composer Steve Reich, the choreographer Merce Cunningham, and the fashion designer Alexander McQueen.)

In the gym, Gandini bounded into a room with a vaulted ceiling, where fifteen jugglers had gathered, dressed in drab sportswear and novelty T-shirts. A game of basketball on an adjoining court filled the space with squeaks and shouts. Gandini chatted with four jugglers, while practicing a right-left pentagon, lobbing clubs in two directions. Ylä-Hokkala, in a denim jumpsuit, tilted her head back and began to toss five colored rings, eyes fixed ten feet above. Apart from her arms, nothing moved.

Nearby, Kelsey Strauch, an acrobat

from Montana and a member of the “Akhnaten” cast, was balancing a silver hula hoop on her forehead while throwing three more from hand to hand. In the opera, she enters walking atop a giant wheel, just before the Pharaoh’s coronation scene. “It’s cool to cross worlds,” she said. “The amount that singers practice is similar—the amount of work to get that one note.”

Tyler Sharkey, a copywriter with a sharp fade and horn-rimmed glasses, was toying with four white clubs. “My dad was actually a clown,” he said. Shar-



Sean Gandini and Kati Ylä-Hokkala

key, who grew up in Staten Island, started out doing magic, but a few years ago, when his father became ill, he began helping out with his shows, juggling in between acts. Now twenty-six, he’d retired from performing. “Advertising’s a little more reliable,” he said.

Jack Hirschowitz was bouncing five green rubber balls. “I’m a juggler,” he said. “I run and juggle.” Hirschowitz, a seventy-four-year-old psychiatrist, recently ran the New York City Marathon with his son, juggling three balls for almost five hours.

At 9 P.M., the regulars strung a net across the room and began a game of volley-club. Gandini looked on wistfully, but he had a Met rehearsal in the morning. He’d been teaching the conductor, Karen Kamensek, how to juggle, and she had promised to try it during a curtain call. “It would be so amazing if she did it,” Gandini said. “She’d bring the house down.”

—Fergus McIntosh

THE REALER REAL

Taking virtual reality for a test drive.

BY PATRICIA MARX



Reality being what it is right now, doesn't an alternative sound tempting? That's what I was thinking the other day, in my apartment, when I adjusted the Velcro straps on my Oculus Quest, a chunky virtual-reality headset made of black plastic, rubber, and a few billion transistors. The headset blocks all ambient light from the wearer's eyes—the razzle-dazzle happens inside. I looked as if a gerbil's casket had been plastered onto the upper half of my face. There was a faint new-car smell.

I pressed the Power button and found myself in the center of a computer-rendered 3-D glass geodesic dome with a million-dollar view of mountains. Sen-

sors in the V.R. headset tracked my movements and instantaneously rejiggered the mise-en-scène. Gazing up, I saw stars; turning full circle, I took in a few Danish-modern sofas, a bookcase, and potted plants. Oh, look, I thought, my Oculus has a fireplace! (For a moment, I considered ditching my apartment and moving, with my headset, into a closet.) In the “living room” was an enormous floating display with a menu of options from Oculus—apps and games that I could buy for \$9.99 to \$29.99 (some are free). Should I travel aboard the International Space Station and experience zero gravity? Take a guided Tai Chi class? Create 3-D paintings in the air?

Have a tête-à-tête with Jesus, who would lead me in a guided meditation? (The In His Presence V.R. Web site asks, “How can God fit into your crowded life with everything else on your plate?”) Disunion, the guillotine simulator, was discontinued, so I'd have to find another way to imagine what it was like to be executed during the French Revolution—perhaps I could download the app produced by Excedrin that allows one to feel what it's like to have a migraine? (Philosophical query: Is it O.K. to cancel a real-life appointment because you have a virtual headache?)

Using the remote control, whose position and buttons are tracked by the headset (there is one for each of your hands), I pointed a light beam at one of the selections—“First Steps,” the introductory tutorial—and pulled a trigger. I learned how to manipulate objects with my glowing white avatar hands. I practiced picking up bright-colored polygons and dropping them to the ground, played tetherball, operated a drone, and swing-danced with a character who bore a resemblance to the M&Ms mascot. If you'd been there, you'd have heard me say “Wow!” an obnoxious number of times. With no visual evidence of the outside world, it was easy to forget that I was in my kitchen. The sensation of being caught up in an illusory scenario is the Nirvana of a well-designed virtual experience. In V.R. circles, this phenomenon of believability is known as “presence,” and it is why your heart rate spikes and you duck for cover when a pretend animated avalanche cascades toward you.

Back in the fakescape of my tutorial, I stretched out my arm to press an imaginary button on an imaginary console on an imaginary table, then lost my balance and fell off the stool I was sitting on, slamming onto the very real floor. I broke my toe. This was a minor misfortune compared with that of the Russian man who, while wearing V.R. goggles, crashed into a glass table and bled to death, according to a TASS news story. The Oculus has a feature that allows you to map out a safe zone and then warns you when you've stepped past the perimeter, but I'd been sitting down.

Fortunately, synthetic globe-trotting is not toe-dependent. During the next several weeks, in various offices and media

With my Oculus, I had adventures right out of a Looney Tunes cartoon.

labs, I had adventures that in the physical world would defy the laws of physics but would be business as usual in a Looney Tunes cartoon. In a warehouse in Pennsauken, New Jersey, lying face down on a contraption that looked as if it were built for medieval torture, I flapped my arms, which were strapped to plastic “wings,” and flew like a bird over New York City. I played a starring role in scenarios designed to educate students, train employees, treat depressed adolescents, help football quarterbacks find open receivers, teach doctors how to communicate with patients, tour college campuses, help police de-escalate tense situations, and increase over-all empathy. I stood next to Lincoln’s ear on Mt. Rushmore.

What to do first? There are hundreds of so-called experiences in the Oculus store, and more that I could import from YouTube and other Web sites. Since gaming makes up most of the consumer V.R. market, there was also a vast geekdom of games. However, most of them seemed more like 3-D versions of existing video games than like radical reinventions of the form, so I chose not to focus on them. Even if the apps were available in 5-D, I doubt that I’d enjoy playing Genital Jousting or Hold My Beer, in which the player is dared to perform stunts, like crossing a busy road, while algorithmically inebriated.

I searched for something sober-minded, and found the Anne Frank House, an app that would allow me to navigate through the secret annex of the office building where Frank and seven others hid during the Second World War. The experience is interactive, so I gained access to the hideaway just as its occupants did—by pulling open a hinged bookcase. The actual museum, in Amsterdam, is empty, the contents having been cleared out by the arresting officers in 1944. In the app version, the hideout has been convincingly restaged (with Anne’s glasses, her father’s Dickens novel). Up in the claustrophobic attic, I could hear the ominous sounds of a plane overhead, birds chirping outside, and the creaking floorboards. But most heart-breaking to me was seeing the pencil marks on the wall showing how much Anne had grown during the years in which the family was in hiding.

After the attic, I needed company, so I decided to try a social V.R. platform. These digital 3-D stomping grounds allow groups of people, represented by avatars, to gather in real time for concerts, sporting events, dance parties, writing workshops, or meetings, or just to hang out. Ryan Schultz, a reference librarian at the University of Manitoba and a V.R. blogger, credits them with lifting his depression. Describing himself in the realm outside his Oculus, he wrote, “To be honest, I kinda suck at this whole reality business.” Now he straddles both cosmos, a recent high point being an evening in which he joined five hundred avatars in a marathon game of drag-queen bingo.

One Wednesday, I had a big night out on a platform called AltspaceVR. With an elegant green-and-blue robot avatar as my stand-in, I ventured forth into “Mingle and Chill,” an event held weekly from eight to eight-thirty. It felt like an avant-garde production of “Cyrano de Bergerac.” If an avatar mingled in a way that bothered me, there were misanthropic measures that I could take. I could mute it, make it invisible to me, or install a bubble around my avatar that insulated me from the offending party—a nifty add-on that some tech entrepreneur should consider offering in the real world. Hearing an announcement that the event was about to begin, I hurried through the bar area, where avatars were chatting, and found myself in a place that resembled a suburban Reform synagogue—sleek, unadorned, full of natural light, with, up front, a slightly raised bimah for the moderator. About fifty avatars, in the forms of robots and humans, milled around, some high-fiving one another, some hovering in the air like drones.

“I’m upset about the world-building tools,” someone named Henry, who apparently had the floor, said. It was impossible to tell who was speaking. The avatar with the blue mop of hair and matching beard? The purple robot whose yellow stripes flashed on and off? Some participants seemed to know what was happening, because I noticed heart and handclap emojis radiating above the heads of several in the room. Before leaving AltspaceVR, I dropped by Open Mic night, which was attended by seventy-one avatars, many of whom were

standing in a line by the stage, waiting to perform. “I almost fell off the stage!” one joked, and then recited an original poem, which ended, “The thought of your not being here makes me sad./We will have our memories to make us glad.” At this point, a bubble popped into my view, with the word “Hello:)” inside. I scrambled to look for the menu of canned responses, but my new friend had drifted off. Had I just turned down a virtual date?

Enough with avatars. I decided to visit some pigs. The National Pork Board, in an effort to show the world that its products formerly lived the good life, has released a five-minute V.R. propaganda tour of three pig farms. I streamed it onto my headset from YouTube and was greeted by Maddie Hokanson, a pig farmer in Minnesota, whose ebullience seemed a little unwarranted, given that she was standing in a farrowing barn among hundreds of swine. I turned my head and looked around: happy sows and adorable piglets in every direction. No smells! No muddy shoes! So it was kind of a downer when a smiling Hokanson signed off by saying, “A three-ounce serving of pork is an excellent source of protein, B vitamins, and other essential vitamins and minerals.” *Bon appétit!*

Macy’s has equipped the furniture departments in stores around the country with V.R. headsets so that customers can visualize how, say, the plaid sectional will look in their den, rather than discovering, after lugging it home, that the only way it will fit is if one end is jammed into the fireplace. Customers at the Herald Square location are buying more and returning less, according to Jazel Armutliev, a V.R. concierge at the store. When I stopped by for a demonstration, Armutliev raised my expectations. “It changes people’s lives,” she said. “Customers get very emotional. One cried.” Then she put my expectations on hold. “I shouldn’t say this,” she said, pausing, “but older people gravitate to it the most.” Under her supervision, I entered details about my living room into a tablet—dimensions, window size, wall color, type of flooring. We positioned digital stand-ins for my furniture, culled from the Macy’s catalogue. I put on the headset. “Here’s the magic,” she said. Yes, there was (sort of)

my living room, but whoa: one of the walls had been shifted a few feet and now sliced through my dining-room table. Original!

Jaron Lanier, a computer scientist/musician/artist/writer, popularized the term “virtual reality,” in 1987. Even then, the concept wasn’t new. As with noodles or eye makeup, its origins are hard to pinpoint. We do know that, in 1962, the cinematographer Morton Heilig introduced an apparatus called the Sensorama Simulator for which he created six short 3-D films, including “I’m a Coca-Cola Bottle.” In a film called “Motorcycle,” the viewer, ensconced in a vibrating bucket seat, stuck his or her head into a box, where footage simulating zooming through Brooklyn unspooled. The visuals were enhanced by wind from a fan and by odors of car exhaust. The Sensorama was a commercial flop. Three years later, the computer scientist Ivan Sutherland built what is regarded as the first computerized head-mounted display. This was the Sword of Damocles, so called because the metal visor—which looked like a head vise with goggles—dangled from a mechanical arm attached to the ceiling.

Although V.R. has not been as lucrative as entertainment companies had hoped, the medium is used a lot in the military (flight and battlefield simulations), for business training, and in health care (preoperative mapping, virtual cadavers for medical students). Therapists use it to treat P.T.S.D. and phobias by exposing patients to their worst fears in controlled doses, eventually desensitizing them to whatever is causing their anxiety. Religion has gone digital, too. The flesh-and-blood pastor D. J. Soto conducts services on the social platform VRChat, in which he preaches to and performs digital baptisms on congregants represented by Winnie the Pooh, SpongeBob SquarePants, and banana avatars.

The new technology has also transformed pornography. The V.R. camera, coming in close, can play a supporting role—one that does not shy away from intimacy and eye contact—and you, the viewer, instead of being a voyeur, are a participant, if you get my drift. Moreover, by tending to focus on the hundred and eighty degrees in front of the viewer instead of on the traditional three

hundred and sixty, V.R. porn is able to deliver a higher resolution than many other genres.

In 2014, Mark Zuckerberg spent two billion dollars to acquire Oculus Quest V.R., which was then a two-year-old hardware company, announcing that he intended to make V.R. the “most social platform ever” and “change the way we work, play, and communicate.” Today, Oculus is the second-largest seller of headsets, after Sony; but, show of haptic gloves, how many of you can say that your daily lives have been transformed by this new medium? (Luddites: Haptic gloves endow you with a sense of touch when you interact with a virtual world.)

Facebook lent me my Oculus Quest, along with a cheaper Oculus Go (\$399 and \$199, respectively; perhaps because headsets enable “travel,” their names often sound like cars—Samsung Gear, Valve Index, Samsung Odyssey). The company’s vast headquarters, in Menlo Park, California, might be either the most utopian dystopia or the most dystopian utopia ever. I met with Yelena Rachitsky, an executive producer of media. Since Oculus no longer creates experiences in-house—it sells equipment and acts as a distributor of content in the virtual store that comes on every headset—what does Rachitsky do? “Independent creators and developers aren’t making their money back, so we’re helping seed the ecosystem,” she said.

Rachitsky, who had worked in immersive theatre, explained, “In film, you’re watching things and you’re vicariously living through the characters.” She teed up the “Coco” app in my headset so that my avatar and hers could have fun together in an animated world based on the Pixar movie. “In V.R., you’re *with* the characters,” she continued. “If you have agency and feel like your choices matter, you care more.” Theoretically, I agree, but the option of choosing an outfit for my Day of the Dead skeleton avatar or teleporting with Rachitsky’s avatar to a Mexican plaza and taking virtual selfies together felt more like being seven and putting on a puppet show with your friend than like making meaningful life decisions.

My favorite experiences among the offerings in the Oculus store turned out to be minimally interactive. “Notes on

Blindness,” a work created in 2016 and narrated by a theologian who went blind, conveyed through audio and animations of spectral blue light what it might be like to live in the almost-dark. By moving my head, I could control the wind blowing against chimes. “Traveling While Black” (2019), a documentary set mostly in the real-life Washington, D.C., restaurant Ben’s Chili Bowl, moves through time from the Jim Crow era of 1958 to the present. In the last scene, you are in one of the diner’s booths, opposite the mother of Tamir Rice, who tells you the story of her son’s fatal shooting.

One flaw in pieces like this one is that it can be hard to focus properly on the stories being told, because it’s so tempting to peer around your three-hundred-and-sixty-degree surroundings to see what everyone is eating, wearing, and listening to on the jukebox. Telling a conventional narrative while allowing for the distraction of interactivity, Rachitsky said, “is a hard nut to crack.” As the Stanford University professor Jeremy Bailenson, who will show up in a few paragraphs, put it, film is fascism and V.R. is anarchy.

When is a startup no longer a startup? When it ditches its Foosball table so that the game room can be turned into additional cubicle space. Such is the situation at the bustling two-story Menlo Park headquarters of Strivr, a business created in 2015 that designs immersive software to help companies train employees. Before checking out a few of its products, I asked the company’s C.E.O. and founder, Derek Belch, who is thirty-four, how Strivr started. “The founding story? I only told that six times yesterday,” Belch said, before launching into a chronology that left me with the conclusion that nothing bad has ever happened to him.

A former kicker on the Stanford football team, Belch, after earning an M.B.A., returned to his alma mater as an assistant coach while getting another master’s degree. For his thesis project, he devised a virtual way to train football players—a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree photo-realistic enactment of plays, allowing, say, a quarterback to practice playing against a virtual defense simply by using a headset. When the Stanford team adopted his program, its performance improved so dramatically that

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the coach told Belch, as he put it, “If I were you, I’d get the hell out of here and go start a company. I’ll even give you some money to get off the ground.” That year, twenty N.F.L. and college football teams bought Belch’s software, bringing in three million dollars in revenue. The next year, Walmart signed on, and Strivr technology is now used in all the company’s forty-seven hundred U.S. stores, and by thirty Fortune 500 companies.

In my first demo, I am a JetBlue technician, standing on the runway under an Airbus 320, which I’m preparing for flight. “This is instead of renting an airplane or doing the training at three in the morning because that’s the only time the plane is available,” Belch explained. The lesson was not unlike a driver’s-ed class, minus the couple who crash on their way to the prom. More intense was the Verizon drama in which I played a store manager being held up at gunpoint. No matter how much your brain knows that the masked guy in the hoodie is an actor holding a toy in cyberspace, the message is not conveyed to your pounding heart when you hear “Open the door!” and turn around to see the barrel of a pistol. Walmart also has a V.R. instruction module on how to deal with an active shooter. Doug McMillon, the company’s C.E.O., credits this program with preventing the death of even more people at its El Paso store in August. (Right now, let’s try not to think about what happens when the bad guy buys an Oculus.)

“We’re going to do the holodeck thing and jump to somewhere new,” Philip Rosedale’s avatar said to my avatar, both constructed from selfies we had taken. When he is not posing as a bunch of pixels conjured by data, Rosedale resembles a Danish movie star, but his stand-in was a dead ringer for Andy Warhol. Mine had a Nancy Pelosi-in-leggings vibe. “Just press the Enter key and you’re going to disappear. I’ll be right behind you,” Rosedale added, and, presto, I was making my way down the steep stone steps of Queen Nefertari’s tomb, trying not to trip, although, in fact, I was sitting in a small room at Stanford, wearing a headset and manipulating a joystick with my thumb. Rosedale was doing the same in a room down the hall. In 2003, he created Second Life, an artificial world not unlike The Sims, that’s ac-

cessible through a computer. At its peak, in 2007, Second Life’s active population was a million. So-called residents can marry, have babies, buy or rent property, construct buildings, go dancing, take classes at accredited colleges (on a pirate ship, if that’s your thing), shop, and earn virtual money that can be converted to the real thing. (Some users make hundreds of thousands of dollars a year selling virtual clothes for avatars.)

Rosedale stepped down as C.E.O. in 2008, and in 2013 he launched High Fidelity. It was meant to be a sequel to Second Life—a confederation of communal V.R. spaces, sometimes called a metaverse (a term coined by Neal Stephenson, in his 1992 science-fiction novel, “Snow Crash”). By 2019, despite the optimistic predictions of some tech leaders, it had become clear that, at least in the near future, there would not be a headset on every head. Last May, High Fidelity laid off twenty per cent of its employees and shifted its focus to include 3-D environments viewable on 2-D computer screens, and marketing its applications to businesses instead of to individual consumers. If AltspaceVR is a singles scene, High Fidelity is an office party.

The tomb I’d explored, based on thousands of screen captures, is a promotional model built by High Fidelity to sell teachers and docents on the idea of virtual tours. In Egypt, tourists are allowed to visit Nefertari’s fragile tomb for no longer than ten minutes. In High Fidelity’s enhanced replica, you could theoretically move in and redecorate; plus, there are loads of virtual props, which a designer



can add for a fee—such as the laser pointer that Rosedale brandished to direct my attention to the sarcophagus or to the candles on the table. They’re unscented—but someday we might be able to get a whiff of Yankee Candle’s “Festering Pharaoh and Sandalwood.” A company called Feelreal is taking preorders for a two-hundred-and-ninety-nine-dol-

lar “multisensory mask” that simulates heat, wind, vibration, and rain, as well as two hundred and fifty-five scents, including burning rubber and patchouli: the perfect combination for evoking a New York taxicab.

A few worlds later, the panda bear that represented Rosedale suggested that we visit his office. Not the real one, in San Francisco, which costs twenty grand a month. High Fidelity gave that up for a virtual office, availing itself of the open-source platform the company is developing which facilitates virtual meetings. The program is not yet offered to the public, so, for now, High Fidelity is High Fidelity’s most enthusiastic customer.

“This is where we work now. We’ve been meeting here for the past several months,” Rosedale said, opening his laptop to reveal a tropical-island landscape that looked to me like “Brigadoon” set in Malibu. A few avatars congregated in a conference room that has a whiteboard for jotting down notes, and others could be seen paired off in snuggeries equipped with sound isolation for confidential chats (“It’s like the real world, only better,” Rosedale said), relaxing in cabanas on the edge of an emerald sea, or doing whatever it is that people do around the campfire. “We are trying to use the technology to make the experience of remote working more human and less lonely,” he said, handing me his headphones so that I could talk with Jess, an employee based in Wisconsin.

I asked her to describe working in a virtual office. “It’s a lot more like working with co-workers than being totally confined to text,” she said. “It’s more impromptu. I can walk by people and hear what they’re talking about, and if it’s something I’m interested in I can intercept the conversation.”

At Stanford, I visited Dr. Loren Sacks, a specialist in pediatric cardiovascular critical care at the Lucille Packard Children’s Hospital. Sacks has developed a V.R. program that trains doctors in delivering bad news. This is a skill you want to hone before trying it on a sick person; and hiring professional actors to run lines with you—a method Sacks describes as “the gold standard”—is costly and not scalable. Sacks is a compact man with a cropped beard and mustache and a soothing delivery. In his tiny

office, made tinier by a bed for overnight attending physicians, Sacks told me, “I’m not trying to teach people to be emotive. I’m giving people tips about how to communicate effectively, and how to convey the sense that they are invested in you. I want to give people a sort of armamentarium of techniques.”

It was time for me to encounter a cyberparent. “Do you want an easy conversation or a slightly harder one?” Sacks asked, explaining that in either case I would be informing the father of an eight-year-old boy named Zach that, because of his son’s worsening condition, he would be taken off the heart-transplant waiting list, and advising him that the mechanical support that his heart was currently receiving should be withdrawn—a certain death sentence. There was also a third possibility—dealing with a silent, uncommunicative parent—but I wasn’t offered that agony.

Mr. Drake, the digital father, sat opposite me, with an expectant look. When he was not on the screen, there were text guidelines about what I should say to him. “Explain that this week’s meeting of the transplant team has a larger than normal impact on Zach. . . . This is the time to prioritize Zach’s comfort. . . . Try to avoid medical jargon. . . . Take a moment to relax your posture. . . .” I was feeling fairly proud of my bedside manner until Mr. Drake suddenly stood up and yelled at me, “You don’t care about my son!” I was directed to “acknowledge that this is a great deal of difficult information, and to offer him the option of continuing at a later time.” Our conversation was then replayed, this time from Mr. Drake’s point of view. Here’s what I learned: it’s a mitzvah for humanity that I didn’t take my parents’ advice about becoming a doctor.

It was in a nondescript room the size of a two-door garage that I was introduced to some of the mind-bending experiments being done at Jeremy Bailenson’s Virtual Human Interaction Lab, at Stanford. The work focusses on how simulated reality can shape our behavior. Bailenson, a forty-seven-year-old former psychologist and engineer whose sun-bleached chin-length hair suggests surfer dude, chaperoned me through a dozen or so digital excursions in the course of three hours. That’s a long time to be im-

mersed in computerized mirages—the lab recommends twenty minutes max. “We work very hard to make you not dizzy,” Bailenson said. (He can tolerate only ten seconds of the simulation used by the Olympic ski team to practice slalom.) Designing minimally nauseating content, he explained, is largely a matter of reducing the lag time between what you feel and what you see.

Bailenson wanted me to try a V.R. piece in which I could fly like Superwoman. “There’s been an earthquake in San Francisco, and the city’s been evacuated,” he said. “One child has inadvertently been left behind. You must find him and give him his medicine to save his life. Are you ready? Hands up and take off.” I took off like a champagne cork. The game is fixed so that you will find the child in eight minutes and save the day. The user is not told that a control group, who are not endowed with superpowers, are passive passengers on a V.R. helicopter tour of the city. After the experiment “ends,” no matter which group you were in you will encounter a staged incident in the laboratory hallway, in which someone has an accident and needs help. The flying heroes, it turns out, are more likely to offer assistance; presumably, seeing yourself as the savior makes you feel like you have the power to help. The point is that what happens to you in a V.R. world can ripple through the real world.

During the next few hours, I sampled so many experiments aimed at turning me into an empathetic and civic-minded person that I can’t believe I haven’t been honored yet by the United Nations. Assuming the guise of a lumberjack, I wielded a chainsaw to cut down a sequoia after learning that similar trees could be saved if I stopped using fluffy toilet paper. A study shows that someone who performs this two-minute exercise is twenty per cent more likely to use less toilet paper compared with those who, instead, merely watched a video about deforestation. Bailenson pulled me out of the experience after a few seconds—time enough to make me feel guilty about the Charmin Ultra Soft in my bathroom but not enough to make me throw it out.

Then, there was the time I became a black man named Michael Sterling. The technique used to pull off this deception

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is called body transfer, or body ownership, and it involves watching your body morph into someone else's. "Look at your reflection," chirped a female narrator in "1000 Cut Journey," an immersive film created by a Columbia University professor named Courtney Cogburn, which premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival last year. In front of me, in a full-length mirror, was a black boy, age six, wearing a teal sweater and gray pants. "Take one step closer and examine your new body. Wave to yourself. You have now become Michael Sterling," she said, in the neutral tone you'd use to tell someone he's now Episcopalian. Yep, I'd been reincarnated: my hands, visible if I looked down, were clones of his. In the body of Michael Sterling, I feel the sting of persistent racism, as manifested in several scenes of "1000 Cut Journey." I play with blocks alongside kids who tease me about my skin color. At fifteen, I am stopped by the police in Brooklyn. At thirty, I am denied a job I deserve. These would be disturbing stories to read about in the third person, but they are deeply affecting and painful when they happen to you. Or even to "you." Whether this will solve the race problem in America remains to be seen.

Body transfer can also allow you to switch genders; become older or younger or forty feet tall; have an out-of-body experience in which a duplicate you levitates above your body and hovers angelically aloft—thus, the theory goes, reducing your fear of death. Or you could turn into a cow. This last transformation came out of a project by one of Bailenson's former students, who wanted to find out whether walking on all fours while being poked by a virtual electric prod and led to slaughter would make a person feel more connected to animals (and, presumably, lower one's subsequent meat consumption).

What happens when we can't tell the difference between the synthetic and the actual? I got an inkling of that future when Mark Miller, a graduate student in computer science at Stanford, appeared in the lab, grinning widely. A few seconds later, an identical Mark Miller walked in and stood next to his holographic twin. What I was seeing through my HoloLens (Microsoft's smart glasses, \$3,500) was the product of augmented reality. Unlike V.R., which wholly immerses the

viewer in a digital creation, A.R. superimposes computer-generated visuals and audio over the physical landscape, and can be viewed on either a handheld device or a head-mounted display. This technology allows you, for instance, to superimpose directions over the road while you're driving, receive data about an enemy's whereabouts on a battlefield, and imagine how pink-flowered wallpaper would look in your powder room—or on a subway platform, if you're into sprucing up the Fifty-ninth Street station.

"You know," Bailenson said, "if a few years from now we all have Apple glasses on, Alexa has a body, and your mother who lives thousands of miles away is here, then the way we walk around a room is going to be governed by ghosts no one else can see." And you thought strangers talking on their Bluetooth earbuds in public was annoying.

Of all my out-of-this-world moments, the most sublime were those I spent in the Stanford swimming pool. The actual sun shone gloriously as I floated in the pool's shallow end, a water-tight headset strapped against my face, a snorkel permitting me to breathe, and a tether attached to the flotation belt around my waist to keep me from drifting into a wall and breaking another toe. Nonetheless, I felt as if I were scuba diving along the ocean floor. I passed coral reefs and a shipwreck and swam with manta rays and singing humpback whales. Later, with a seal as my guide, I explored the lost city of Atlantis and then, after a slight technical glitch, glided through outer space, beholding Earth from afar and inspecting the Hubble telescope up close.

Stephen Greenwood, the C.E.O. and founder of Ballast Technology, the company that produces these expeditions for water parks (consumers pay around ten dollars a pop), explained in the cafeteria after my pretend dive that when you are submerged in water you are less likely to suffer from motion sickness than you are on land. Ballast is in the business of location-based entertainment (L.B.E.), a thriving sector of the disappointing consumer V.R. market. The term is used to describe any multiplayer game or amusement that takes place at a site outside the home, such as an arcade, a cinema, an escape room, a theme park, or Washing-

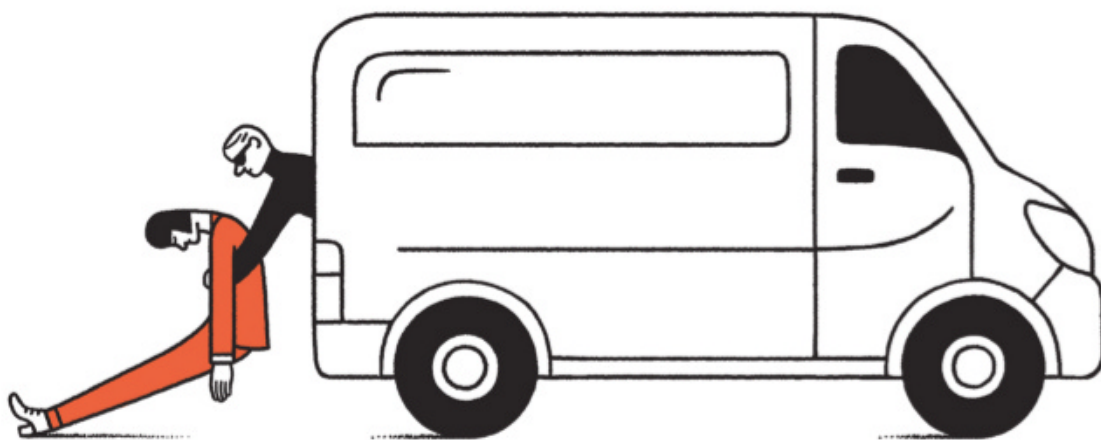
ton, D.C. There are estimated to be about fifteen thousand of these types of venues, not including Washington, D.C.

My Oculus Quest now sits on a bench at home in my foyer, making me feel guilty whenever I walk by. Keram Malicki-Sanchez, an actor and futurist and the founder and director of Canada's longest-running V.R. conference, told me (by old-fashioned e-mail from Toronto) that my response was typical: "People are dismayed when they find their V.R. headsets collecting dust, having believed that they would use them all the time." This, however, is the correct scenario; V.R., he said, is a tool—not a television—akin to a typewriter, a piano, or a toaster oven.

I wondered, Was there anything in the here and now that could not be replaced virtually? Rosedale had answered, "A hug." Ken Perlin, the founding director of the Media Research Lab, at N.Y.U., addressed the question in a poem that he wrote on his blog in September, the entirety of which is:

when technology
shifts reality, will we
know the world has changed?

In order to get a feel for the future, Jak Wilmot, the twenty-two-year-old co-founder of a V.R. content studio called Disrupt, lived inside a headset for a week in February—and, of course, live-streamed every second. Cocooned in his five-hundred-square-foot apartment in Atlanta, the windows blacked out so that his circadian clock would not be affected by natural light, he slept, ate, exercised, socialized, and worked in virtual reality. He did not take his headset off even to shower, keeping the electronics dry under a homemade rig that looked like a plastic-wrapped stool perched on top of his head. What he missed most, he told me, was "not seeing day or night cycles," adding that "to counteract this I ended up loading in simulations that would match the real-world time—a sunrise field in the morning, nighttime sky at night." At the end of hour one hundred and sixty-eight, you can watch Wilmot ceremoniously lift his headset off his head, squint, and break into a smile. The smile gives way to laughter as he goes outside and looks up at the sky. "Oh, my gosh, the graphics," he says. "They're so good." ♦



DEEP STATE D.M.V.

BY CORA FRAZIER

I'd like to clear up some misconceptions about the Deep State Department of Motor Vehicles. Myth No. 1: *It's impossible to find.* Not so. You know when you wake up to pee in the middle of the night and walk back down the hall to your bedroom and your partner is sprawled right in the middle of the bed? The next time that happens, walk to the window. Open it. There will be a burner phone on your fire escape, registered under an alias that's a combination of the names of former Presidents ("Martin Van Nixon"). Turn it on.

Next misconception: *It's impossible to make an appointment at the Deep State D.M.V.* We're always telling people: Download the app. It's so much easier than going online, and the application is available in your burner phone's app store. All the other app options surveil you. This one also surveils you. Just choose a convenient time slot from the drop-down menu, and that's it! Appointment made.

Another misconception: *The wait is short.* On the day of your appointment, maintain your normal routine. Within four hours of the chosen time, a plainclothes or non-plainclothes person will approach you and, without making eye contact, say, "Which way do you park on a hill—with your wheels angled toward the curb, or away?" At this point, you should respond, "What?" Then you'll black out.

You'll wake up in an underground

bunker. The floor will be linoleum, the lights fluorescent. You'll be sitting in a no-frills black chair in a row of other black chairs. You'll look around and, with your eyes, ask the two or three other people sitting there what's going on. You won't be able to remember an identifying physical feature of any of them, so don't try.

You'll hear someone call out a number. You won't know if it corresponds to one of the people waiting—were you given a number? Were you supposed to ask for one? Is there a check-in desk somewhere? It will be a high number, expressed in scientific notation, for security purposes. It will be yours. Rise.

"Martin Van Nixon?" a soft voice will say behind you. For a second, you'll forget the alias on your burner phone. You'll turn around and see Princess Diana, wearing a purple skirt suit and looking fresh and gorgeous for her nearly sixty years.

"Are you here to get a new D.S. license or to merely renew?" she'll ask in a posh lilt. You won't be able to answer.

"Did you bring one hundred pieces of identification?" she will ask.

"They were . . . in a folder in my work bag," you will stammer. "But I didn't have time to get it. I met the contact in the bathroom of the poke-bowl place where I was eating lunch."

"Splendid. We'll review that now."

You will nod, tears filling your eyes, remembering how you mourned this woman although you didn't know her per-

sonally, and barely knew her impersonally.

"Smile!" she'll say, holding up a black object the size of a matchbook and snapping a photo that will define you for years. A flash will blind you, and you will lose consciousness. Then you will wake up leaning against your office building, thick Nuts 4 Nuts smoke from a street vender filling your nostrils and making your eyes water.

"How long was I out?" you'll ask the vender. "Who brought me here?" He will shrug, of course, keeping an eye on his portable stove.

Do you need a Deep State driver's license? The question misses the mark. First of all, there is no "license," per se, merely an ever-changing security code on your burner phone that you can flash to any member of law enforcement who asks to see your I.D. This will trigger a narcoleptic response. You may want to keep your regular state driver's license, to show to bouncers and bartenders.

Does the Deep State offer practice tests, for young people preparing to take their written driver exam? Any underage person we've recruited will have already received a manila folder under his or her bedroom door, full of information (about, for example, the meanings of various colors of paint on curbs). They are to memorize the information and then burn the documents in the sink of a locked bathroom, dividing the ashes between five different trash receptacles.

People accuse us at the Deep State D.M.V. of maintaining our power by orchestrating everything from sham road tests to bus-driver assassinations. These are conspiracy theories. Do you know how many articles of the Geneva Convention we'd violate by secretly developing the so-called "leg-paralysis virus" that prevents people from walking? We're guessing . . . five?

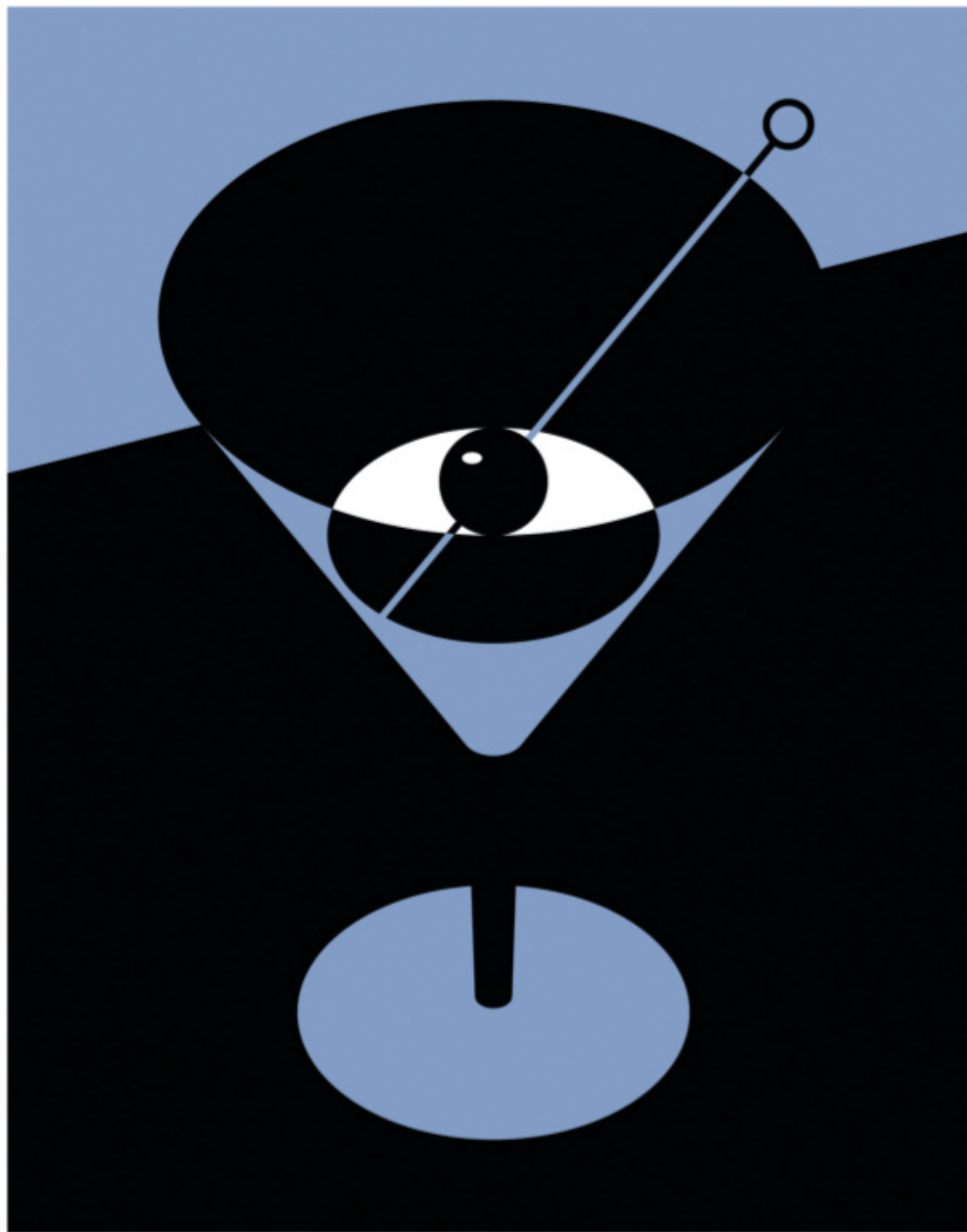
Can you opt out of your Deep State driver's license after you receive one? What a sweet question! The answer is no. While you're unconscious, we'll plant security chips in your vertebrae with your license number and the year and model of the vehicle you drive, and, every time you think you've gotten away with double parking, you haven't. What we'll do with this information we can't reveal. But know that it's in the hands of people with bodies so classified that they can't even check the organ-donation box. ♦

ANNALS OF ALCOHOL

GINMANIA

The intoxicating history behind a contemporary craze.

BY ANTHONY LANE



The other day, I had a White Lady, followed by a Love Thrill and a Hanky Panky. They made a great team. All three were supplied to me by Federico, at the Savoy Hotel, in London. Enter the lobby, make a left, trot up the stairs, and you come to the American Bar, a longtime shrine at which many parched pilgrims have sought relief. The suave and bearded Federico is one of the high priests who, clad in white jackets, serve behind the bar, and I watched in reverence as he aerated the egg white that would soften the blow of my White Lady. I took a sip. It was like being kicked by a cloud.

The White Lady was not invented

at the Savoy, and a spritz of mystery surrounds its birth. Credit is often given to Harry MacElhone, the resident genius at Harry's New York Bar, in Paris, who is said to have devised the mixture for—or with the scholarly assistance of—F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway. But it was Harry Craddock, the head barman at the Savoy from 1926 to 1938, who refined the recipe. Legend also insists that he buried a White Lady, presumably confined in its shaker, inside a wall of the Savoy, like a time capsule. (Future archeologists will, one hopes, unearth the capsule and declare it to be some form of chalice, once used in a sacred rite. They

will not be wrong.) The final flourish, the story goes, was then applied by one of Craddock's successors, Peter Dorelli, who added the egg white, thus conjuring the creamy top note that a good White Lady deserves.

The Love Thrill and the Hanky Panky, on the other hand, were indeed born at the Savoy. The first incorporates, among its other charms, fig liqueur and, according to the menu, banana. I had visions of little yellow bergs drifting mushily around and bumping against the edge of the glass, but no; all that rose from it was a suspicion of the bananaesque. The Hanky Panky is a more serious proposition. It was devised by Craddock's predecessor, the formidable Ada Coleman, who reigned over the American Bar from 1903 to 1926, at a time when women, as customers, were not allowed *in* the bar. She came up with the Hanky Panky for a favorite client, who, pleading fatigue, demanded a concoction "with a bit of punch in it." (He meant a hit, not something festive and fruity in a bowl.) This was duly delivered, and the result, featuring a cameo role by Fernet Branca, has a rich brown tinge, hinting at the medicinal. Nothing is more cunning than a drink that gulls you into the false, short-lived, but delicious belief that it might be good for you.

After my Hanky Panky, and having briefly sampled an Alaska, whose golden radiance is caused by yellow chartreuse, I called it a night. Not that my work was done. I had come to the Savoy on a mission: a single-minded quest, with many paths. Yet I hadn't even had the basic courtesy to order a dry Martini. And I really ought to have stayed for a Tom Collins, a Window into Paradise, a gimlet, a rickey, and a Sun Sun Sun, before slapping myself back to life with a Corpse Reviver No. 2. I could even have risked an Electric Lover, although that contains glitter, and, as a rule, I try not to be arrested for sparkling in a built-up area. So, what links the White Lady, the Martini, and all these other delights? Well, if I'd had the nerve, I would have requested this:

A fiery Lake that sets the Brain in Flame, burns up the Entrails, and scorches every Part within; and at the same time a *Lethe* of Oblivion, in which the Wretch immers'd drowns his most pinching Cares.

Alternately celebrated and demonized for three centuries, gin is now cool again.

Those are the words of a guy named Bernard Mandeville, writing in 1714, and sounding stressed, but I didn't want to eat into Federico's evening by quoting them in full. Instead, I just asked for gin.

Not that long ago, gin was for squares. Maybe your parents drank it, and your grandparents before them. Gin: the very word was plain and unexciting. How uncool was it to opt for gin, confining yourself to one drab syllable, when the whisky-loving dude beside you at the bar was still deciding among Bruichladdich, Craigellachie, and Smoky Goat?

If you did pick gin, chances were that it came in a dry Martini. A noble thing, which has lent succor to millions of drinkers, it is mainly a coalition of gin and vermouth, although minor parties are sometimes invited to join and, as with all coalitions, the balance of power is fiercely contested. The dryness increases in inverse proportion to the amount of vermouth. Luis Buñuel suggested holding the bottle of vermouth in a shaft of sunlight, so that it would irradiate the gin without touching it: a wicked twist on the doctrine of the Incarnation. Drier still, if spiked with apocrypha, is Noël Coward's definition: "A perfect martini should be made by filling a glass with gin, then waving it in the general direction of Italy." And yet, for decades, the fact of the Martini somehow clouded the choice of gin, if you could call it a choice at all. Tanqueray. Beefeater. Bombay Sapphire. Gordon's. That, more often than not, was it.

Similar limits applied to the gin-and-tonic. This was, by custom, a drink that spoke more unfathomably to the deeps of the British soul than to that of other races. From the outset, it was laced with memories, or myths, of imperial rule; what Schweppes first sold in 1870 was not just tonic water but "Indian Tonic Water," and today, though besieged by an army of Fever-Tree tonics, it still holds considerable sway. The water is tonic because it contains quinine, which is anti-malarial—a lifesaver, if you happen to be invading or infesting a marshy foreign land. That is why, a century after Schweppes's innovation, to quaff a gin-and-tonic on a summer's day, in the well-to-do shires of England, was no less nostalgic than refreshing. Up went the hospitable cry "Ice and a slice?" and

down sank the hearts of the younger generation, who observed their elders clutching a bottle of Gordon's as if it were a Teddy bear, and decided that gin was ancient history. Its compound of the hearty and the sprightly was an embarrassment. Its bite was gone. Never again could it become the latest thing.

And now look. Gin is on the rise and on the loose. It has gone forth and multiplied. Forget rising sea levels; given the sudden ascendancy of gin, the polar gin caps must be melting fast. Torn between a Tommyrotter and a Cathouse Pink? Can't tell the difference between a Spirit Hound and an Ugly Dog? No problem. There are now gins of every shade, for every social occasion, and from every time zone. The contagion is global, and I have stumbled across gins from Japan, Australia, Italy, and Colombia. Finland brings us the uncompromising Bog Gin. I have yet to taste Dragash, which emanates from a mountainous region of Kosovo, but, if it proves to be anything but wolfish, I shall be disappointed. Visitors to Thailand, or lovers of ginseng, will surely enjoy a nip of Iron Balls.

By any reckoning, the spread of gin has been a freakish phenomenon. (I have seen it described as a "Ginaissance." Anybody heard using this word should, of course, be banned from public bars in perpetuity.) When, where, and why it began is hard to pinpoint; Federico, at the Savoy, puts the cart before the horse and contends that the founding of Fever-Tree tonic, in 2004, drove the headlong return of gin to the market. What's inarguable is that the outbreak has occurred since the turn of the millennium. One devout Web site, theginisin.com, which lists three hundred and eight American gins, refers to Death's Door, a fine Wisconsin brand, as "an old kid on the block," since it harks all the way back to the mists of 2006.

Death's Door is among the sixty gins, fourteen of them American, that are dished up at Bathtub Gin, on Ninth Avenue, in Manhattan, which does a decent impression of a speakeasy. I dropped in on a rainy day, feeling suitably furtive, and, having survived the close scrutiny of the doorkeeper, felt duty bound to partake of Dorothy Parker, a gin from Williamsburg. (Discounts are not offered, sadly, to readers of this magazine.) A word of advice: head

downtown from there, grab a seat at the Tribeca Grill, and, while awaiting your entrée, try a dose of O.R.E. 118—said to be the world's first raw vegan gin, and new to the market last year. Follow it up with a Wagyu sirloin, medium rare, and feel your conscience explode.

Meanwhile, we have Monkey 47, an über-gin from the Black Forest of Germany, which has become something of a cult, largely on the ground of its botanicals. Not a big deal, you might say, given that botanicals are present in every gin. They are the ingredients—floral, herbal, spicy, and so on—that, via an alchemy that we are encouraged to view as mystical, provide each brand with its singular magic. In most gins, the number of botanicals tends to stay in the single figures, or to hover just above. Not in Monkey 47, though, whose name is a statistical boast. Add three more (bubble gum, manure, and Marlboro Lights, say), and you'd have a nice round number. Personally, I can't even *think* of forty-seven botanicals, and, unless the company is selling directly to neurasthenic beagles, I can't conceive of any customer who will sniff out every aroma. Do some flavors not cancel one another out in the blending?

Often, for reasons of practicality and pride, botanicals are selected with a nod to local produce. Take Calamity Gin, from Texas. Well-trained taste buds, given a slosh, will detect traces of juniper, lavender, bergamot, rose, and cardamom, plus zest of grapefruit, orange, and lime. But those are standard elements, found in varying ratios in innumerable gins. What makes this one special is its secret weapon, bluebonnets. And why? Because the bluebonnet is the state flower of Texas. As yet, nobody in New Hampshire has had the guts to brew a granite gin, with a delicate bouquet of damp stone, but these are early days.

Then, there is Scotland. It has its hands full with whisky, you might think, yet the place is brimming with gins. The most audacious of these is Theodore, which raises the bar, so to speak, by labelling itself as "Pictish." If gin can hail from extinct ethnic groupings, why not from imaginary lands? The arrival of homely Hobbit Gin, or the self-refrigerating White Witch Gin, distilled in Narnia, cannot be far behind.

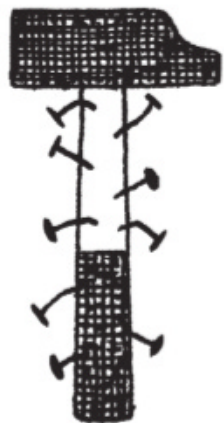
Few Scottish innovations have been

more successful than Hendrick's Gin, which has managed the improbable feat of muscling in amongst the major players, thanks in part to its apothecary-style bottles—again, the medicinal touch—and the moxie of its publicity campaigns. (Hendrick's is part of William Grant & Sons, a sizable Scottish firm that also owns Glenfiddich single malt and other spirits. Hence the muscle.) The inclusion, late in the manufacturing process, of two unlikely essences, rose petal and cucumber, has become a selling point, and Hendrick's loyalists, when constructing a gin-and-tonic, have been beguiled into adding a slice of cucumber rather than of lemon or lime.

A novice who dives into gin, or simply dips a toe, will soon notice the designation "London Gin" or "London Dry Gin" on many bottles, and will, understandably, assume that the stuff was made in London. Not so. The word "London" denotes a method, and you won't need me to remind you that Annex II, Section 22, Subsection (a) (i) of Regulation (EC) No 110/2008 of the European Parliament and of the Council ordains that London Gin be "obtained exclusively from ethyl alcohol of agricultural origin, with a maximum methanol content of 5 grams per hectolitre of 100% vol. alcohol, whose flavour is introduced exclusively through the re-distillation in traditional stills of ethyl alcohol in the presence of all the natural plant materials used." In other words, mix your bits together at the start and toss 'em all in the pot. Late arrivals will not be admitted.

By this token, Hendrick's is not a London Gin, because of that fiddling about with roses and cucumbers in the wake of the distillation; conversely, the much prized Hernö, despite being made on the High Coast of Sweden, *does* make the grade. To the purist, London Dry is and always will be the eye of the gin storm—calm, clean, and uncluttered, whatever the fads and the frills that swirl around it. And that is as it should be, because any attempt to track gin to its origins winds up going through London. What is more, the city, unwilling to ditch old habits, has been at the hub of the resurgent obsession with gin. New

distilleries have opened, as have bars consecrated to gin. In Marylebone, the 108 Bar not only purveys forty-three brands of gin but distills its own, in-house. Further west, on Portobello Road, lies the Distillery, which calls itself "a four-floor mecca for the discerning drinker." Guests are invited to check into the boutique gin hotel for the night, or to attend the Ginstitute, joining a "team of Ginstructors for an immersive gin history session, followed by a nosing." Mind if I don't?



To be honest, the whole country is awash with gin. Sixty-six million bottles of it were sold in the United Kingdom in 2018, a rise of forty-one per cent from the previous year; that's one bottle per head of the population, and, therefore, by my count, two hundred million headaches. During the same period, the total sales of British gin, at home and abroad, reached more than two and a half billion dollars. With any wave, needless to say, you get the flotsam, and I am now in possession of a board game all about gin, a pack of gin playing cards—for gin rummy, I guess—and, grimmest of all, a bag of crumbly Pink Gin Fudge, which is slightly less appetizing than a bar of soap but costs five times as much. Examining these and other symptoms, one can only conclude that the British people, and Londoners in particular, are in the throes of a full-scale gin craze. Just like old times.

It is more or less agreed that the Gin Craze—a solid historical event, like the Thirty Years' War—ran from 1720 to 1751. For modern historians, the dates blur at the edges; for many people who lived through that era, especially in labyrinthine London, almost nothing was *not* a blur. In "Gin: A Global History," Lesley Jacobs Solmonson makes the alarming claim that "at any given time one out of every four residents—essentially all of the city's poor—was completely and utterly incoherent."

The craze didn't erupt from nowhere. The British have been imbibing gin, or some approximation of it, for hundreds of years. Seventeenth-century British soldiers, fighting in the Low Countries, showed a sweet tooth for the local rot-

gut, and the word "gin" derives from *jenever*, the Dutch for juniper. (Just to complicate matters, *genever*—a respectable spirit, sweeter and warmer than regular gin, and ideal for fending off the northern chill—is still widely drunk in the Netherlands.) Juniper had long been embraced as a curative, especially against the plague (it didn't work), and that benign reputation lingered. We don't know exactly what went into the "strong water made of juniper" that the diarist Samuel Pepys knocked back on October 10, 1663, but it did the trick and, he said, allayed his constipation.

If you want someone to blame, or to praise, for opening the floodgates to the deluge of gin, the obvious candidate is William of Orange, the Dutch ruler who came to the throne—the English throne—in 1689. A ban on trading with France, the eternal foe, meant that, with French brandy off limits, a gap yawned in the market. Better yet, in 1690 Parliament passed "an Act for encouraging the distilling of brandy and spirits from corn." (Almost any grain crop qualified as corn.) From that innocent present participle "encouraging" a mighty fountain sprang. And, lo, the people came to lap.

Accurate figures for the lapping are provided by Jessica Warner, in "Craze: Gin and Debauchery in an Age of Reason." She writes:

In 1700, the average adult drank slightly more than a third of a gallon of cheap spirits over the course of a year; by 1720 that amount had nearly doubled; and by 1729, the year when the first act restricting sales of gin was passed, the number had nearly doubled again, to slightly more than 1.3 gallons per capita.

The *annus mirabilis*, Warner adds, was 1743, when one person's average annual consumption hit 2.2 gallons. Note the word "restricting." For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction, and for every government that goads us on to consume something delicious, taxable, or addictive, there will be another, not long afterward, that panics, blusters, and tries to turn the tide that it unleashed.

In all, there were eight Gin Acts between 1729 and 1751, which suggests that not all of them had the desired effect. The problem was that distilling had become a domestic trade, with low-grade gin freely and easily produced on pri-

vate premises. Beer was subjected to well-established regulations, but not gin. Patrick Dillon, in “Gin: The Much Lamented Death of Madam Geneva,” points out that “anyone who could afford a vat and a still could set up shop and make spirits.” All that the seller required, Dillon writes, was “a cellar or garret—failing that, a wheelbarrow.” It’s estimated that, in one district of London, the ratio of normal houses to dram shops, as they were known, was five to one. The city suffered an epidemic of drams. The craze was on.

No law on booze will ever surpass the ingenuity of those determined to break it, as any student of Prohibition is aware, and as any reader of “The Life and Uncommon Adventures of Captain Dudley Bradstreet,” published in 1755, can confirm. The author was on the make during the later Gin Acts, and, having studied them for loopholes, displayed both wit and élan in staying, if only by a whisker, within the rules. He realized, for instance, that the authorities, who by now were clamping down on distillation in the home, had no right to break *into* the home to do the clamping. So he “purchased in *Moorfields* the Sign of a Cat, and had it nailed to a Street Window; I then caused a Leaden Pipe, the small End out about an Inch, to be placed under the Paw of the Cat; the End that was within had a Funnel to it.” At night, Bradstreet entered the house, shut the door, and waited:

At last I heard the Chink of Money, and a comfortable Voice say, “Puss, give me two Pennyworth of Gin.” I instantly put my Mouth to the Tube, and bid them receive it from the Pipe under her Paw, and then measured and poured it into the Funnel, from whence they soon received it.

Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the vending machine. Every culture has a soft spot for comic resourcefulness, and you can still see a Puss & Mew, as it was called, at the Beefeater distillery, in South London. Animal spirits, however, were the sunny side of the Gin Craze; the flip side was abominably dark. The damage to health, both mental and physical, was calamitous, and the threat to public order, given that gin was the cheapest and nastiest narcotic available to the working class, was sufficient to frighten the more fortunate. In one dismal development, the Gin Acts spurred enterprising citi-

zens to snitch on illegal distillers—a lucrative but hazardous pursuit, with some informers being chased and beaten to death by angry crowds. And all for gin. The spirit in question was not the elegant nectar, graced with a balance of botanicals, that we celebrate today but a base and vicious moonshine, which, not content with wrecking your constitution, went after your fundamental sense of right and wrong and destroyed that, too:

On Sunday night we took the Child into the Fields, and stripp’d it, and ty’d a Linen Handkerchief hard about its Neck to keep it from crying, and then laid it in a Ditch. After that, we went together, and sold the Coat and Stay for a Shilling, and the Petticoat and Stockings for a Groat. We parted the Money, and join’d for a Quarter of Gin.

That is the confession made by a Londoner named Judith Defour. The child was her own daughter, Mary, whom she murdered in January, 1734. Defour was convicted and hanged, and her crime was one more piece of evidence in the case against gin. The notion that strong liquor can dissolve the ties that are meant to bind society together, and that the principal outcome of drinking is not pleasure but chaos, was never propounded in more vigorous detail than by “Gin Lane,” William Hogarth’s famous print of 1751. At the center of the image is a woman with her clothes in rags and her

breasts exposed; lost in a haze of gin, she smiles, and fails to notice that her child has slipped her embrace and tumbled over a railing to its doom. She has not taken a life deliberately, like Defour, but let it fall away, without a care. Behind her, the townsfolk tussle and bicker; one man shares a bone with a dog; house-tops collapse into the street. The world is dead drunk.

“Gin Lane” was one of a pair. Its counterpart, to be viewed in juxtaposition, was “Beer Street,” in which the English recline at their ease, lightly flirt, and go about their lawful business. The comparison could not be starker, and it proves that what troubled Hogarth, and kindled his moralizing gaze, was not the act of drinking in itself—after all, a tankard of good English ale was evidently a boon—but the drinking of gin. *That* was the root of all evil. (Like so many evils, as perceived by this island race, it had started abroad.)

The same year that “Gin Lane” was issued, Hogarth’s friend Henry Fielding, who was not just the author of “Tom Jones” and other novels but also a senior magistrate in London, much concerned with the plight of the poor, wrote a pamphlet entitled “An Enquiry Into the Causes of the Late Increase of Robbers.” One cause that Fielding cites is inebriation, and specifically “that Poison called Gin.” He regrets having to



“He said he was going out to get oat milk and vape refills, but he never came back.”

send offenders to prison, when “Gin alone was the Cause of the Transgression,” and his antidote to the poison is bluntly economic: “Suppose the Price was to be raised so high, by a severe Import, that Gin would be placed entirely beyond the Reach of the Vulgar!”

All of which demonstrates why Jessica Warner is right to call gin “the first modern drug.” Our terrors about opium or crack cocaine, our debates over legalization, and the variations in our judicial severity are amply prefigured in the Gin Craze. When Warner raises “the question of whether a reforming elite was reacting to gin *per se* or rather to larger and more intractable threats to their society and way of life,” she is looking around her and not merely back into the past. Not that everybody, then or now, is automatically filled with the zeal for reform; for a classic statement of the libertarian approach, try Samuel Johnson, whose brisk Tory tolerance had an answer for most conundrums. Asked why it was worth giving halfpence to beggars, since they would “only lay it out in gin or tobacco,” he asked, in return, “Why should they be denied such sweeteners of their existence?” He continued:

It is surely very savage to refuse them every possible avenue to pleasure, reckoned too coarse for our own acceptance. Life is a pill which none of us can bear to swallow without gilding; yet for the poor we delight in stripping it still barer.

And so the arguments blaze on, from age to age. The madness that gripped the British capital in the first half of the eighteenth century was the worst and the most notorious phase in the saga of gin, but it was certainly not the last. From the beginning, this transparent liquid, readily mistaken for water, seems to have self-infused, sucking up our deepest intimations—more pungent than any botanical—about how we should live together, how fast the standards of that living can plunge, how they might best be raised, and how, if we renounce all hope, any of us could die in a ditch. Gin, in short, is never just about gin. A century after Judith Defour was executed, Dickens, who was attuned more keenly to London than anyone has ever been, saw that not much had changed since Fielding’s day, and that what comes out of a bottle is of less importance than what drives us to pick it up:

Gin-drinking is a great vice in England, but wretchedness and dirt are a greater; and until you improve the homes of the poor, or persuade a half-famished wretch not to seek relief in the temporary oblivion of his own misery, with the pittance which, divided among his family, would furnish a morsel of bread for each, gin-shops will increase in number and splendour.

So, venom or elixir? Panacea, luxury, or hooch? Or a pretext for not mentioning other things? The jury will stay out forever. In order to define gin, however, or to pronounce on its universal impact, it’s not enough to bemoan the excesses of the past or to carouse amid the wares of the present. If you thirst for the quintessence of gin, you have to make your own.

Meet Tyler. In some respects, I prefer Beryl, and she’s even more remarkable, but I couldn’t handle her. She deserves better than me. Tyler it is, then. Together, we can make beautiful gin.

By tradition, most gin stills have female names. One distillery, in the Cotswolds, is home to Proud Mary, Lorelei, and Janis. (A tribute to Joplin, if you’re wondering.) Take the high road to Islay, in the Inner Hebrides, and you’ll find Ugly Betty. Elsewhere, there’s a Messy Bessy, a Gin Jeanie, and the plainspoken Joyce. And let’s not forget Ethel the Still—a piece of machinery, not a modest medieval queen—by the shores of Lake Michigan. As for London, the reigning matriarch is Prudence, “the first copper pot still to launch in London for nearly two hundred years,” according to her owner, Sipsmith. She arrived in 2009. Two sisters, Patience and Constance, came along later. The three of them sound like the well-bred daughters of a nineteenth-century temperance clan, yet their job is to pour forth an intoxicating stream. Bliss.

Beryl is the one and only still at 58 Gin, a small but purposeful firm, founded by an Australian named Mark Marmont, in 2014, and now tucked away down a mews in the East End of London. You go through an archway, and there, at the rear of the premises, stands Beryl, a steampunk dream in copper and steel. If you didn’t know what you were looking at, you would probably ask yourself why the brass, woodwind, and timpani sections of the London Symphony Orchestra had

been moved to the lair of a Bond villain.

On the left is a pot, as bulbous as a genie and as big as an igloo. Polished to a blinding shine, it can hold four hundred and fifty litres. There’s a lockable metal hatch, which swings open, as if to admit a deep-sea explorer. (Marmont is a former dive instructor. He must feel right at home.) Down the hatch you tip your personal potpourri of ingredients; inside, they mingle politely with near-pure ethanol and demineralized water. Once heated, the mixture emits vapor, which steams out of the top of the pot and passes through a network of pipes, cooling as it goes, and eventually emerging, from a column on the right, as a clear liquid. This you dilute. And *that*, give or take a hundred adjustments, and a few perspiring years of practice, is how you bring gin—proper gin—into being.

Or, at any rate, that is one way of doing it. Other methods exist, notably vapor infusion, whereby the botanicals, rather than macerating in the alcohol and water, are hung above, in sieves or baskets, through which the steam ascends. But Beryl’s technique remains hard to beat, and it is copied, in a less complex form, by Tyler—one of a row of mini-stills that line the side of the room. Tyler is no taller than a coffee-pot, with a temperature gauge the size of a wristwatch, and it was quietly thrilling to witness the procedure at work. The penultimate stage, in which the heat of the almost-gin is abated by running water as it glides through a copper coil, was enough to breed the illusion, if only for a few minutes, that I was in charge of my own private nuclear reactor.

58 Gin, like many distilleries, offers gin tuition, and the teacher, for the evening class that I attended with three other hopefuls, was Hannah Jeffs. She handed each of us a clipboard, on which was a list of twenty-six botanicals. Some of these were fairly mainstream, like pink grapefruit and chamomile; others were more *recherché*, like aniseed and cassia; and one, Grains of Paradise, sounded like a gnarly and sardonic rock band from Hawaii. Three were compulsory—juniper, angelica, and orris-root, which looks like sawdust, smells of next to nothing, and is also much in demand in the perfume industry. (At one point, Chanel allegedly bought up

so much orris stock as to put gin-makers in jeopardy.) This left me with the agonizing task of choosing five or six more ingredients to create my unique brew. Briefly, recalling the example set by Monkey 47, I toyed with the idea of throwing in all twenty-six, plus eye of newt and toe of frog for good measure, but wiser counsels prevailed.

In the end, my list was short and solid: blood orange, Spanish lemon (not to be confused with Egyptian lemon, which was less smoky), rosemary—a warhorse of the gin trade, and none the worse for that—and cubeb pepper. Whatever that may be. Hannah, kindly but cryptically, advised a last-minute speck of vanilla bean. All these I weighed out, in tiny amounts (0.05 grams, for the pepper), and lovingly dropped into Tyler. Alcohol and water were already in situ. The still was fired up. Thumbs were twiddled, fingernails chewed. And, a paltry half an hour later, out came gin. My gin, easy as pie. If you want to know how Moses felt when he smote the rock, just find your nearest distillery, book a lesson, and start smiting.

One advantage of gin, unlike many other spirits and almost every wine, is that it's ready to roll. Make it, and you can drink it straight away. Not the head, as it's called, the first liquor to issue from the pipe as the distilling begins to bear fruit, or the tail, the dregs that conclude the operation, but the stuff in between. (The vocabulary of spirits is strangely carnal. After you swill a small amount around a glass, the lines that trickle downward are referred to as legs, and their viscosity is a useful pointer to the balance of your botanicals.) This you can bottle without delay, having paused only to top it up with water, thus determining its potency. London Dry Gins, say, must have a minimum alcohol content of 37.5 per cent, though most of them, in practice, occupy the low-to-mid-forties zone. You *can* use less water, the result being Navy Strength gin at fifty-seven per cent or higher, but only if you have no plans to walk upright for the rest of the day.

Thus it was that, at the end of my trip to East London, I was able to go home with a bottle, labelled and wax-sealed, of what I had produced. If I'd been assembling my own Scotch whisky, I would have been away for three years;

that is how long, by law, whisky has to sit and ruminate in casks. Of late, admittedly, a fashion has arisen for the casking of gin, and I have recently sampled Hibernation, a Welsh gin that bides its time in white-port casks, and PX Cask Gin, manufactured by Greensand Ridge, in Kent, and aged in casks of Pedro Ximenez. The latter has the color and the distant aroma of sherry, though it would take a palate less primitive than mine to discern any casking in the liquor itself, sipped neat—until, that is, it receives a splash of water, or a burst of tonic. *Then* the sherry starts to talk.

And so we arrive at the central enigma of gin. However funky the flavorings that you insert after distillation, and whatever the fizzy mixers you pour on top, you can never add anything of genuine meaning and substance to gin. All you can do is bring out what is there. (Directors of Shakespeare, I suspect, feel much the same way.) The gin that I cooked up was oddly non-disgusting and, at first blush, not so far from the signature product of 58 Gin—hardly a surprise, since they have many components in common. But mine, on further acquaintance, dwindled into a novelty, whereas the experience that underlay the professional version began to glimmer through. I made a few cocktails from each, and there was no denying the melancholy truth: my Hanky lacked Panky.

It was a moment of revelation when Joe Harper, the bar manager at the Savoy, said to me, “You can only *echo* the gin.” Thus did gin itself, during the craze of the eighteenth century, bear echoes of the lusts and the gross inequalities of the epoch. The history and the taste of gin are interfused, ceaselessly, twist upon twist. In which case, what will the multitude of twenty-first-century gins, and the silly things that we do with them, tell of us? As I reach for an Electric Lover, or a shot of Kokoro Gin Blueberry & Lemongrass Liqueur, or—God preserve us—a bottle of Zymurgorium Flamingo Pink Gin, what message am I sending to the future? Whether such mania can or should persist, of course, is open to debate. All bubbles burst in the end, and gin will be no exception. Something else, no doubt, will swell in its stead. Already, there are rumors of rum. ♦

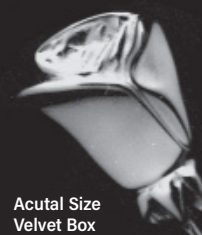


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BLOOD AND SOIL IN INDIA

A Hindu-nationalist government has cast two hundred million Muslims as internal enemies.

BY DEXTER FILKINS

On August 11th, two weeks after Prime Minister Narendra Modi sent soldiers in to pacify the Indian state of Kashmir, a reporter appeared on the news channel Republic TV, riding a motor scooter through the city of Srinagar. She was there to assure viewers that, whatever else they might be hearing, the situation was remarkably calm. “You can see banks here and commercial complexes,” the reporter, Sweta Srivastava, said, as she wound her way past local landmarks. “The situation makes you feel good, because the situation is returning to normal, and the locals are ready to live their lives normally again.” She conducted no interviews; there was no one on the streets to talk to.

Other coverage on Republic TV showed people dancing ecstatically, along with the words “Jubilant Indians celebrate Modi’s Kashmir masterstroke.” A week earlier, Modi’s government had announced that it was suspending Article 370 of the constitution, which grants autonomy to Kashmir, India’s only Muslim-majority state. The provision, written to help preserve the state’s religious and ethnic identity, largely prohibits members of India’s Hindu majority from settling there. Modi, who rose to power trailed by allegations of encouraging anti-Muslim bigotry, said that the decision would help Kashmiris, by spurring development and discouraging a long-standing guerrilla insurgency. To insure a smooth reception, Modi had flooded Kashmir with troops and detained hundreds of prominent Muslims—a move that Republic TV described by saying that “the leaders who would have created trouble” had been placed in “government guesthouses.”

The change in Kashmir upended more than half a century of careful politics, but the Indian press reacted with nearly uniform approval. Ever since Modi was first elected Prime Minister, in 2014, he has been recasting the story of India,

from that of a secular democracy accommodating a uniquely diverse population to that of a Hindu nation that dominates its minorities, especially the country’s two hundred million Muslims. Modi and his allies have squeezed, bullied, and smothered the press into endorsing what they call the “New India.”

Kashmiris greeted Modi’s decision with protests, claiming that his real goal was to inundate the state with Hindu settlers. After the initial tumult subsided, though, the *Times of India* and other major newspapers began claiming that a majority of Kashmiris quietly supported Modi—they were just too frightened of militants to say so aloud. Television reporters, newly arrived from Delhi, set up cameras on the picturesque shoreline of Dal Lake and dutifully repeated the government’s line.

As the reports cycled through the news, the journalist Rana Ayyub told me over the phone that she was heading to Kashmir. Ayyub, thirty-six years old, is one of India’s best-known investigative reporters, famous for relentlessly pursuing Modi and his aides. As a Muslim from Mumbai, she has lived on the country’s sectarian divide her whole life. She suspected that the government’s story about Kashmir was self-serving propaganda. “I think the repression is probably worse than it’s ever been,” she said. She didn’t know what she might find, but, she told me, “I want to speak to those unheard voices.”

In both Hindi and English, Ayyub speaks with disorienting speed and infectious warmth; it is difficult to resist answering her questions, but she might have another one before you finish responding to the first. On the phone, she invited me to meet her in Mumbai and try to get into Kashmir, even though foreign correspondents were banned there during the crackdown. When I arrived, she handed me a pair of scarves and told me to buy a kurta, the typical Indian

tunic. “I am ninety-nine per cent sure you will be caught, but you should come anyway,” she said, laughing. “Just don’t open your mouth.”

Ayyub and I landed at the Srinagar airport two weeks after Modi’s decree. In the terminal was a desk labelled “Registration for Foreigners,” which she hustled me past, making sure I kept my head down. The crowd was filled with police and soldiers, but we made it to the curb without being spotted, climbed into a taxi, and sped off into Srinagar.

Even from a moving car, it was clear that the reality in Kashmir veered starkly from the picture in the mainstream Indian press. Soldiers stood on every street corner. Machine-gun nests guarded intersections, and shops were shuttered on each block. Apart from the military presence, the streets were lifeless. At Khanqah-e-Moula, the city’s magnificent eighteenth-century mosque, Friday prayers were banned. Schools were closed. Cell-phone and Internet service was cut off.

Indian intelligence agents are widely understood to monitor the rosters of local hotels, so Ayyub and I, along with an Indian photographer named Avani Rai, had arranged to stay with a friend. When we got there, a Kashmiri doctor who was visiting the house told us to check the main hospital, where young men were being treated after security forces fired on them. The police and soldiers were using small-gauge shotguns—called pellet guns by the locals—and some of the victims had been blinded. “Go to the ophthalmology ward,” the doctor said.

At the hospital, we found a scene of barely restrained chaos, with security officers standing guard and families mixing with the sick in corridors. While I stood in a corner, trying to make myself inconspicuous, Ayyub ran to the fourth floor to speak to an eye doctor. After a few minutes, she returned and motioned for me and Rai



Prime Minister Narendra Modi presents himself as an ascetic economic visionary. He is also a hero of anti-Muslim bigots.

to follow. "Ward eight," she said. Thirty gunshot victims were inside.

As the three of us approached, a smartly dressed man with a close-cropped beard stepped into our path and placed his hand on Ayyub's shoulder. "What are you doing here?" he said. Rai looked at me and quietly said, "Run." I turned and dashed into the crowd. The bearded man took Ayyub and Rai by the arm and led them away.

Ayyub grew up in Sahar, a middle-class neighborhood of Mumbai. Her father, Waquif, wrote for a left-wing newspaper called *Blitz*; later, he was a high-school principal and a scholar of Urdu, the language of north India's Muslims. Rana remembers midnight poetry readings, when her father's friends crowded into the living room to recite their verses. The Ayyubs were the only Muslim family on the block, but they weren't isolated. They went into the streets with their neighbors to celebrate Hindu festivals like Holi and Diwali, and twice a year they opened their home for Muslim feasts. "The sectarian issue was always there, but we were insulated from all that," Ayyub said. "All of my friends growing up were Hindu."

Muslim-Hindu harmony was central to the vision of India's founders, Mohandas Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru,

who laid the foundation for a secular state. India is home to all the world's major religions; Muslims constitute about fourteen per cent of the population. As the British Empire prepared to withdraw, in 1947, Muslims were so fearful of Hindu domination that they clamored for a separate state, which became Pakistan. The division of the subcontinent, known as Partition, inspired the largest migration in history, with tens of millions of Hindus and Muslims crossing the new borders. In the accompanying violence, as many as two million people died. Afterward, both Pakistanis and Indians harbored enduring grievances over the killings and the loss of ancestral land. Kashmir, on the border, became the site of a long-running proxy war.

India's remaining Muslims protected themselves by forging an alliance with the Congress Party—Gandhi and Nehru's group, which monopolized national politics for fifty years. But the founders' vision of the secular state was not universally shared. In 1925, K. B. Hedgewar, a physician from central India, founded the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, an organization dedicated to the idea that India was a Hindu nation, and that Hinduism's followers were entitled to reign over minorities. Members of the R.S.S. believed that many Muslims were descended from Hindus who had been

converted by force, and so their faith was of questionable authenticity. (The same thinking applied to Christians, who make up about two per cent of India's population. Other major religions, including Buddhism and Sikhism, were considered more authentically Indian.)

Hedgewar was convinced that Hindu men had been emasculated by colonial domination, and he prescribed paramilitary training as an antidote. An admirer of European fascists, he borrowed their predilection for khaki uniforms, and, more important, their conviction that a group of highly disciplined men could transform a nation. He thought that Gandhi and Nehru, who had made efforts to protect the Muslim minority, were dangerous appeasers; the R.S.S. largely sat out the freedom struggle.

In January, 1948, soon after independence, Gandhi was assassinated by Nathuram Vinayak Godse, a former R.S.S. member and an avowed Hindu nationalist. The R.S.S. was temporarily banned and shunted to the fringes of public life, but the group gradually reestablished itself. In 1975, amid civic disorder and economic stagnation, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi suspended parliament and imposed emergency rule. The R.S.S. vigorously opposed her and her Congress Party allies. Many of its members were arrested, which helped legitimize the group as it reentered the political mainstream.

The R.S.S.'s original base was higher-caste men, but, in order to grow, it had to widen its membership. Among the lower-caste recruits was an eight-year-old named Narendra Modi, from Vadnagar, a town in the state of Gujarat. Modi belonged to the low-ranking Ghanchi caste, whose members traditionally sell vegetable oil; Modi's father ran a small tea shop near the train station, where his young son helped. When Modi was thirteen, his parents arranged for him to marry a local girl, but they cohabited only briefly, and he did not publicly acknowledge the relationship for many years. Modi soon left the marriage entirely and dedicated himself to the R.S.S. As a *pracharak*—the group's term for its young, chaste foot soldiers—Modi started by cleaning the living quarters of senior members, but he rose quickly. In 1987, he moved to the R.S.S.'s political branch, the Bharatiya Janata Party, or B.J.P.



"'Too many tote bags,' they said."

When Modi joined, the Party had only two seats in parliament. It needed an issue to attract sympathizers, and it found one in an obscure religious dispute. In the northern city of Ayodhya was a mosque, called Babri Masjid, built by the Mughal emperor Babur in 1528. After independence, locals placed Hindu idols inside the mosque and became convinced that it had been built on the former site of a Hindu temple. A legend grew that the god Ram—an avatar of Vishnu, often depicted with blue skin—had been born there.

In September, 1990, a senior B.J.P. member named L. K. Advani began calling for Babri Masjid to be destroyed and for a Hindu temple to take its place. To build support for the idea, he undertook a two-month pilgrimage, called the Ram Rath Yatra, across the Indian heartland. Travelling aboard a Nissan jeep refitted to look like a chariot, he sometimes gave several speeches a day, inflaming crowds about what he saw as the government's favoritism toward Muslims; sectarian riots followed in his wake, leaving hundreds dead. Advani was arrested before he reached Ayodhya, but other B.J.P. members carried on, gathering supporters and donations along the way. On December 6, 1992, a crowd led by R.S.S. partisans swarmed Babri Masjid and, using axes and hammers, began tearing the building down. By nightfall, it had been completely razed.

The destruction of the mosque incited Hindu-Muslim riots across the country, with the biggest and bloodiest of them in Mumbai. At first, Ayyub's family felt safe; they were surrounded by friends. But, after several days of mayhem, a Sikh friend, whom the family called Uncle Bagga, came to tell Waquif that a group of neighborhood men were coming for his daughters. Waquif was frightened; Rana, who was then nine years old, had been stricken by polio and, though she was largely recovered, the illness had weakened the left side of her body. That night, she and her older sister Iffat fled with Bagga. They stayed with some relatives of his for three months, before the family reunited in Deonar, a Muslim ghetto a few miles away. "I felt helpless," Rana told me. "We were like toys, moved from one place to another by someone else."

Deonar is an impoverished neighbor-

hood of fetid sewers and tin shacks. The Ayyubs, accustomed to a middle-class existence, found their lives transformed. "We were living in a very small place, very dirty, on a very crowded and dirty street," Rana said. Mumbai had been transformed, too. When she enrolled in a predominantly Hindu school nearby, her classmates called her *landya*, an anti-Muslim slur. "That is the first time I ever really thought about my identity," she said. "Our entire neighborhood—our friends—were going to kill us."

For the R.S.S., the initiative in Ayodhya paid off spectacularly. Membership soared, and by 1996 the B.J.P. had become the largest party in parliament. During the dispute over Babri Masjid, Ashis Nandy, a prominent Indian intellectual, began a series of interviews with R.S.S. members. A trained psychologist, he wanted to study the mentality of the rising Hindu nationalists. One of those he met was Narendra Modi, who was then a little-known B.J.P. functionary. Nandy interviewed Modi for several hours, and came away shaken. His subject, Nandy told me, exhibited all the traits of an authoritarian personality: puritanical rigidity, a constricted emotional life, fear of his own passions, and an enormous ego that protected a gnawing insecurity. During the interview, Modi elaborated a fantastical theory of how India was the target of a global conspiracy, in which every Muslim in the country was likely complicit. "Modi was a fascist in every sense," Nandy said. "I don't mean this as a term of abuse. It's a diagnostic category."

On February 27, 2002, a passenger train stopped in Godhra, a city in Gujarat. It was coming from Ayodhya, where many of the passengers had gone to visit the site where Babri Masjid was destroyed, ten years earlier, and to advocate for building a temple there. Most of them belonged to the religious wing of the R.S.S., called the V.H.P.

While the train sat at the station, Hindu travellers and Muslims on the platform began to heckle one another. As the train pulled away, it stalled, and the taunting escalated. At some point, someone—possibly a Muslim vender with a stove—threw something on fire into one of the cars. The flame spread, and the passengers were trapped inside;

when the door was finally pushed open, the rush of oxygen sparked a fireball. Some fifty-eight people suffocated or burned to death. As word of the disaster spread, the state government allowed members of the V.H.P. to parade the burned corpses through Ahmedabad, the state's largest city. Hindus, enraged by the display, began rampaging and attacking Muslims across the state.

Mobs of Hindus prowled the streets, yelling, "Take revenge and slaughter the Muslims!" According to eyewitnesses, rioters cut open the bellies of pregnant women and killed their babies; others gang-raped women and girls. In at least one instance, a Muslim boy was forced to drink kerosene and swallow a lighted match. Ehsan Jafri, an elderly Congress Party politician, was paraded naked and then dismembered and burned.

The most sinister aspect of the riots was that they appeared to have been largely planned and directed by the R.S.S. Teams of men, armed with clubs, guns, and swords, fanned out across the state's Muslim enclaves, often carrying voter rolls and other official documents that led them to Muslim homes and shops.

The Chief Minister of the Gujarati government was Narendra Modi, who had been appointed to the position five months before. As the riots accelerated, Modi became invisible; he summoned the Indian Army but held the soldiers in their barracks as the violence spun out of control. In many areas of Gujarat, the police not only stood by but, according to numerous human-rights groups, even took part.

When the riots began, Rahul Sharma was the senior police officer in charge of Bhavnagar, a district with a Muslim population of more than seventy thousand. In sworn testimony, Sharma later said that he received no direction from his superiors about how to control the riots. On the fourth day, a crowd of thousands gathered around the Akwada Madrasa, a Muslim school, which had about four hundred children inside. The vigilantes were brandishing swords and torches. "They were acting in an organized way," Sharma said. "They were going to kill the children." Sharma ordered his men to use lethal force to prevent an attack; when warning shots had no effect, they fired, killing two men and injuring several more. The crowd

scattered, and Sharma escorted the children to safety.

In nearly every other district, though, the violence carried on unchecked. Sharma, instead of being celebrated as a hero, was transferred out of the district to a make-work desk job. L. K. Advani—the advocate of destroying the mosque in Ayodhya, who had risen to be India's Home Minister—called Sharma and suggested that he had let too many Hindus die.

The riots dragged on for nearly three months; when they were over, as many as two thousand people were dead and nearly a hundred and fifty thousand had been driven from their homes. The ethnic geography of Gujarat was transformed, with most of its Muslims crowded into slums. One slum formed inside the Ahmedabad dump, a vast landscape of trash and sewage that towered hundreds of feet in the air. (That ghetto, dubbed Citizens' Village by its inhabitants, is still home to a thousand people, who live in shacks and breathe the noxious air; when the monsoons come, filth from the dump floods the streets and shanties.)

As the riots festered, Ayyub, who was then nineteen, decided to help. After telling her mother that she was going trekking with a friend in the Himalayas, she put herself on a train to the Gujarati city of Vadodara. Because the unrest was still flaring, she disguised herself with a bright-red bindi—the dot of paint that Hindu women wear on their forehead.

She spent three weeks in relief camps, helping rape victims file police reports. The camps were surrounded by open-pit latrines, and the smell of sewage was overpowering; children lay around with flies on them. At times, mobs armed with swords and Molotov cocktails came looking for Muslims. During one incursion, Ayyub hid in a house and peered out as a crowd of some sixty men jostled outside. "I was palpitating," she said. "Gujarat made me realize that what happened in Mumbai was not an aberration."

After the riots, Modi's government did almost nothing to provide for the tens of thousands of Muslims forced from their homes; aid was supplied almost entirely by volunteers. Asked about this, Modi said, "Relief camps are actually child-making factories. Those who keep on multiplying the population should be taught a lesson." Although

some Hindu rioters were arrested, just a few dozen were ultimately convicted. Mayaben Kodnani, a B.J.P. minister, was the only official to be punished significantly; she was convicted of murder, attempted murder, and conspiracy. When Modi's government later came to power in Delhi, she was cleared of all charges.

In the following months, there were indications of substantial government complicity. According to independent investigations, the Hindu mobs had moved decisively, following leaders who appeared to have received explicit instructions. "These instructions were blatantly disseminated by the government, and in most cases, barring a few sterling exceptions, methodically carried out by the police and Indian Administrative Service," concluded a citizen-led inquiry that included former Supreme Court justices and a former senior police official.

During the violence, a senior federal official named Harsh Mander travelled to Gujarat and was stunned by the official negligence. Seeing that many of his colleagues were colluding in the blood-bath, he retired early from his job to work in the makeshift camps where Muslim refugees were gathering. He has dedicated much of the rest of his life to reminding the public what happened and who was responsible. "No sectarian riot ever happens in India unless the government wants it to," Mander told me. "This was a state-sponsored massacre."

A few officials claimed that the decision to encourage the riots came from Modi himself. Haren Pandya, a Modi rival and Cabinet minister, gave sworn testimony about the riots, and also spoke to the newsweekly *Outlook*. He said that, on the night the unrest began, he had attended a meeting at Modi's bungalow, at which Modi ordered senior police officials to allow "people to vent their frustration and not come in the way of the Hindu backlash." A police official named Sanjiv Bhatt recalled that, at another meeting that night, Modi had expressed his hope that "the Muslims be taught a lesson to ensure that such incidents do not recur."

But there was not much political will to pursue the evidence against Modi, and his accusers did not stay in the public eye for long. After Bhatt made his accusation, he was charged in the death of a suspect in police custody—a case that had sat

dormant for more than two decades—and sentenced to life in prison. In 2003, the Cabinet minister Haren Pandya was found dead in his car in Ahmedabad. His wife left little doubt about who she believed was behind it. "My husband's assassination was a political murder," she said.

For Modi, the riots had a remarkable effect. The U.S. and the United Kingdom banned him for nearly a decade, and he was shunned by senior leaders of his party. (In 2004, the B.J.P. Prime Minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, was voted out. He blamed Modi for the loss.)

In Gujarat, though, his prestige grew. Rather than seeking reconciliation, Modi led a defiant Hindu-pride march across the state, which was met with an outpouring of support. Modi often spoke in barely coded language that signalled to his followers that he shared their bigotry. In one speech, during the march, he suggested that the state's Muslims were a hindrance to be overcome. "If we raise the self-respect and morale of fifty million Gujaratis," he said, "the schemes of Alis, Malis, and Jamalis will not be able to do us any harm." The crowd let out a cheer. That December, after a campaign in which he made several incendiary anti-Muslim speeches, he led the B.J.P. to a huge electoral victory in Gujarat.

Elsewhere in India, the B.J.P.'s fortunes were sinking; as a result, Modi's hard-line faction was able to seize the Party leadership. He also began to build a national reputation as a pro-business leader who presided over rapid economic development. "The B.J.P. was a dead party," Ayyub told me. "The only chance they had to power was Modi, because he had all these followers—all these big businessmen—and so the riots were all forgotten."

Eventually, a Supreme Court investigative team declared that there was not enough evidence to charge Modi in the riots—a finding that human-rights groups dismissed as politically motivated. A few persistent advocates tried to keep the issue alive. In 2007, when Modi appeared on the Indian network CNN-IBN, the journalist Karan Thapar asked him, "Why can't you say that you regret the killings?"

"What I have to say I have said at that time," Modi replied, his face hardening. As Thapar kept pressing, Modi

THE GREEN LAKE

What work will you leave behind
I ask the tailor
Who has sewn the button upon my shoe
I can walk again

Yesterday everything felt so hopeless
Now I have the energy to sit in the sun
All of the damned seething baths
Now I am finally on my own

When I go places I call her
And unload my fashionable happenstance
I used to stop in the street and pick up an acorn
There were so many things I used to do

In the middle of the fire
I went and thought to mention it to the ghost
I have already burned, it said
Its face was like my father's but was different

What work will you leave behind
I asked myself while in the rain
Oh, this and that, it answered me
And handed me the stars, then the moon

—Dorothea Lasky

grew agitated. “I have to rest,” he said. “I need some water.” Then he removed his microphone and walked away.

In 2013, when another reporter asked if he felt sorry about the deaths of so many Muslims, he suggested that he had been a helpless bystander. “If someone else is driving a car and we’re sitting behind—even then, if a puppy comes under the wheel, will it be painful?” Modi said. “Of course it is.”

To many observers, Modi’s success stemmed from his willingness to play on profound resentments, which for decades had been considered offensive to voice in polite society. Even though India’s Muslims were typically poorer than their fellow-citizens, many Hindus felt that they had been unjustly favored by the central government. In private, Hindus sniped that the Muslims had too many children and that they supported terrorism. The Gandhi-Nehru experiment had made Muslims feel unusually secure in India, and partly as a result there has been very little radicalization, outside Kashmir; still, many

Hindus considered them a constant threat. “Modi became a hero for all the Hindus of India,” Nirjhari Sinha, a scientist in Gujarat who investigated the riots, told me. “That is what people tell me, at parties, at dinners. People genuinely feel that Muslims are terrorists—and it is because of Modi that Muslims are finally under control.”

In 1993, Ayyub’s father wrote a book about the riots in Mumbai. He titled it “I Am Alive”—his habitual response to friends who wrote to him during the unrest to see how he was. When Rana Ayyub began considering a career in journalism, she showed some of the same pugnacious self-assertion. “In my childhood, everybody said, ‘She’s a weak child,’” she told me. “It’s like you have to prove a point to everybody that, no, I’m not a weak child.”

At first, she wanted to effect change by joining the civil service. But, she said, “people told me, ‘There’s no way you will be able to do anything as a police officer, because you still have to be answerable

to cops and corrupt politicians.’” After graduating from Sophia College in Mumbai with a degree in English literature, Ayyub bounced around from Web sites to a television station before landing at a magazine called *Tehelka*. Published in English, *Tehelka* had a small circulation but an outsized reputation for tough investigations. Ayyub took to the work, producing pieces on killings by the police and a smuggling racket run by officials in Mumbai. “I was trying to help people,” she told me. “I was trying to figure out what was happening, and it made me feel better about myself.”

In 2010, in a series of cover stories for *Tehelka*, Ayyub tied Modi’s closest adviser, Amit Shah, to a sensational crime. The scion of a high-caste family, Shah had trained as a biochemist but excelled as a political tactician. A onetime president of the Gujarat Chess Association, he had twice helped engineer Modi’s election as the top official in Gujarat; afterward, he was made the Minister of State for Home Affairs.

Ayyub was investigating a case that had begun five years before, when police in Gujarat announced that they had fatally shot a suspected terrorist dispatched by Pakistan to assassinate Modi. In political and journalistic circles, the announcement inspired skepticism; rumors had been circulating that the police killed criminals and then pretended that they were Muslim assassins, heroically thwarted just before they could get to Modi. Wised-up Indians derided the police claims as “fake encounters,” but, among Gujaratis who were alarmed by the riots, they helped boost Modi’s reputation as a defender of Hindus.

It turned out that the alleged assassin, a local extortionist named Sohrabuddin Sheikh, had no history of Islamist militancy. Before long, federal investigators established that he had been murdered by the police. There were witnesses, including Sheikh’s wife and a criminal associate of his. But, a couple of days after the killing, his wife was murdered and her body burned; the associate was killed in police custody a year later.

Ayyub didn’t believe that the ultimate responsibility lay with the police. “I never looked at the arrests that were made, the people who shoot,” she told me. “I looked for the kingpins.” One source, a police officer, suggested that



The journalist Rana Ayyub is renowned for pursuing Modi and his aides.

Amit Shah had been involved. Ayyub first met the officer at a secluded house in the countryside. “He could see that my hands were shaking,” she told me. “He said, ‘If you’re going to do this story, then you have to stop shaking.’” The next time they met—in a graveyard, at 3 A.M., with Ayyub disguised in a burqa—he gave her a CD, hidden in a bouquet of flowers. It contained six years of Shah’s telephone records, including the times and locations of his calls.

Using the records, Ayyub showed that Shah and the three officers suspected of murdering Sheikh’s associate had been in extensive contact, before and after the killing. Her reporting also offered an explanation of Shah’s motive: a police official told her that the murdered criminals “knew something that could have been damning for the minister.”

Ayyub was not the first journalist to

expose official misconduct in the case, but the evidence around Shah was explosive. Federal agents asked her for a copy of Shah’s phone records, and she obliged. Within weeks, Shah was arrested on charges of murder and extortion; he had allegedly been involved in the same illicit business as Sheikh. (A spokesman for Shah denied his complicity, saying, “Shah was implicated in the said criminal offence purely on political considerations.”) Federal police eventually charged thirty-eight other people, including Gujarat’s top police official, the former Home Minister for the state of Rajasthan, and more than twenty officers suspected of being involved in the murders.

The morning of Shah’s arrest, Ayyub awoke to find that her reporting was the top of the news. A popular television anchor read the entirety of one

of her pieces on the air. “I was just a twenty-six-year-old Muslim girl,” she said. “I felt people would finally see what I can do.” Her stories, along with others, set off a series of official investigations into the Gujarati police, who were suspected of killing more than twenty people in “fake encounters.” But, she thought, even Shah was not the ultimate kingpin. Her source had told her that the police were under intense pressure to stall the investigation and to hide records from federal investigators—suggesting that someone powerful was trying to squelch the case. The headline of one of her stories was “SO WHY IS NARENDRA MODI PROTECTING AMIT SHAH?”

Despite the evidence piling up around Modi, he only grew stronger. Increasingly, he was mentioned as a candidate for national office. In 2007, while running for reelection as Chief Minister, Modi taunted members of the Congress Party to come after him. “Congress people say that Modi is indulging in ‘encounters’—saying that Modi killed Sohrabuddin,” he told a crowd of supporters. “You tell me—what should I do with Sohrabuddin?” he asked.

“Kill him!” the crowd roared. “Kill him!”

Within a few weeks of Shah’s arrest, Ayyub hit on an idea for a new article: “If I can go after Shah, why not Modi?” She told her editors at *Tehelka* that she suspected Modi of far graver crimes than previously reported. If she went undercover, she argued, she could insinuate herself into his inner circle and learn the truth.

In the United States, it is a cardinal rule of journalism that reporters shouldn’t lie about their identity; undercover operations tend to be confined to the industry’s yellower margins. In India, the practice is more common, if still controversial. In 2000, *Tehelka* sent a former cricket player, wearing a hidden camera, to expose widespread match-fixing and bribery in the sport. Later that year, two reporters posing as representatives of a fake company offered to sell infrared cameras to the Ministry of Defense. Thirty-six officials agreed to take bribes; the Minister of Defense resigned.

Tarun Tejpal, *Tehelka*’s editor, told

me that he authorized stings only when there appeared to be no other way to get the story. In this case, he said, “Modi and Shah were untouchable. The truth would never come out.” He told Ayyub to go forward.

As she began reporting, Ayyub created an elaborate disguise, designed to appeal to the vanities of Gujarat’s political establishment. “Indians have a weakness for being recognized in America,” she said. “The idea that they would be famous in the United States—it was irresistible to them.” She became Maithili Tyagi, an Indian-American student at the American Film Institute Conservatory in Los Angeles, visiting India to make a documentary. She invented a story about her family, saying that her father was a professor of Sanskrit and a devotee of Hindu-nationalist ideas. Ayyub, who has distinctive curly hair, straightened it and tucked it into a bun. She rehearsed an American accent, and, for added verisimilitude, hired a French assistant, whom she called Mike. Only her parents knew what she was doing; she stayed in touch on a separate phone.

In the fall of 2010, Ayyub rented a tiny room in Ahmedabad. For eight months, she flattered her way into the local elite, claiming that her film would focus on Gujaratis who were prospering under Modi’s tenure. “Modi’s biggest support comes from Gujarati-Americans,” she told me. “I said, I want to meet the most influential people who can tell me the Gujarat story—who will tell me the secret sauce of what Mr. Modi has done in the past fifteen years.”

At first, Ayyub and Mike appeared only at apolitical social events, to get locals used to seeing them around. As she moved in closer, she began wearing hidden cameras and microphones—in her watch, in her kurta, in her phone. (When she bought the minicams, at a Spy Shop in New Delhi, she told the salesman that she was trying to catch an adulterous husband.) Ayyub was welcomed nearly everywhere. She made revealing recordings of senior Gujarati officials, some of whom directly accused Modi and Shah of wrongdoing. Even Modi agreed to see her for a brief chat in his office, where his staff offered her biographies of him to read. Modi showed her copies of Barack Obama’s books.

“He said, ‘Maithili, look at this. I want to be like him someday,’” she recalled. She was struck by his canniness. “I thought Modi was either going to be Prime Minister or he was going to jail.”

Ayyub took her findings back to her editors. But, after reviewing transcripts, Tejpal decided against publishing a story. The conversations were mostly of officials implicating others—often Modi and Shah. Tejpal told me that he needed people admitting their own crimes. “The fundamental ethics of the sting is that a sting is no good if a person doesn’t indict oneself,” he said. “If you come to me and say, ‘I had a conversation with someone, and he told me that Tom, Dick, and Harry are fuckers, and he knows that Tom is taking money from So-and-So, and Harry really fucked So-and-So,’ it means nothing. That’s just cheap gossip.”

Ayyub was convinced that Tejpal had succumbed to pressure from the B.J.P. “He caved in,” she told me. “I was inside Modi’s and Shah’s inner circle, as close as you could get.” (Tejpal denied this, and other editors spoke in support of him.)

Determined to get her story out, Ayyub wrote a draft of a book and shopped it to English-language newspapers, magazines, and publishing houses. All rejected her pitch. Some said that the book was too partisan; most argued that her methods could expose them to lawsuits. Several editors told me privately that they thought Ayyub’s work was revelatory—but that it was impossible to publish. “We wanted to excerpt the book on the cover of our magazine, but word got around, and phone calls started coming in,” Krishna Prasad, who was then the editor of *Outlook*, told me. “We simply couldn’t do it.”

By 2012, Modi had become the most recognizable B.J.P. leader in India, and seemed likely to run for Prime Minister. “Everyone saw the writing on the wall,” Ayyub said. “Modi was going to win, and no one wanted to alienate him.” Ayyub kept trying to find a publisher, but nothing came through. She told me that she fell into a profound funk, relying on antidepressants for the next four years. In 2013, Tejpal, her editor at *Tehelka*, was accused of sexual assault and spent seven months in prison be-

fore being released on bail. (He maintains his innocence, and the case is ongoing.) The magazine all but collapsed. “I thought that was the end,” she said.

As Modi began his run for Prime Minister, in the fall of 2013, he sold himself not as a crusading nationalist but as a master manager, the visionary who had presided over an economic boom in Gujarat. His campaign’s slogan was “The good days are coming.” A close look at the data showed that Gujarat’s economy had grown no faster under his administration than under previous ones—the accelerated growth was “a fantastically crafted fiction,” according to Prasad, the former editor. Even so, many of India’s largest businesses flooded his campaign with contributions.

Modi was helped by an overwhelming public perception that the Congress Party, which had been in power for most of the past half century, had grown arrogant and corrupt. Its complacency was personified by the Gandhi family, whose members dominated the Party but appeared diffident and out of touch. Rahul Gandhi, the head of the Party (and Nehru’s great-grandson), was dubbed the “reluctant prince” by the Indian media.

By contrast, Modi and his team were disciplined, focussed, and responsive. “The Gandhis would keep chief ministers, who had travelled across the country to see them, waiting for days—they didn’t care,” an Indian political commentator who has met the Gandhis as well as Modi told me. “With Modi’s people, you got right in.” While the Congress leaders often behaved as if they were entitled to rule, the B.J.P.’s leaders presented themselves as ascetic, committed, and incorruptible. Modi, who is said to do several hours of yoga every day, typically wore simple kurtas, and members of his immediate family worked in modest jobs and were conspicuously absent from senior government positions; whatever other allegations floated around him, he could not be accused of material greed.

The B.J.P. won a plurality of the popular vote, placing Modi at the head of a governing coalition. As Prime Minister, he surprised many Indians by challenging people to confront problems that had gone unaddressed. One was public defecation, a major cause of disease throughout India. At an early speech

in Delhi, he announced a nationwide program to build public toilets in every school—a prosaic improvement that gratified many Indians, even those who could afford indoor plumbing. Modi also addressed a series of widely publicized gang rapes by speaking in bracingly modern terms. “Parents ask their daughters hundreds of questions,” he said. “But have any dared to ask their sons where they are going?”

The address set the tone for Modi’s premiership, or at least for part of it. As a young *pracharak*, he had taken a vow of celibacy, and he gave no public sign of breaking it. Unburdened by family commitments, he worked constantly. People who saw him said he exuded a vitality that seemed to compensate for his otherwise solitary existence. “When you have that kind of power, that kind of adoration, you don’t need romance,” the Indian political commentator told me. In Gujarat, Modi had focussed on big-ticket projects, wooing car manufacturers and bringing electricity to villages; as Prime Minister, he introduced a sweeping reform of bankruptcy laws and embarked on a multibillion-dollar campaign of road construction.

Modi’s effort to transform his image succeeded in the West, as well. In the United States, newspaper columnists welcomed his emphasis on markets and efficiency. In addition, Modi called on a vast network of Indian-Americans, who cheered his success at putting India on the world stage. The Obama Administration quietly dropped the visa ban. When Modi met Obama, not long after taking office, the two visited the memorial to Martin Luther King, Jr., a man Modi claimed to admire. During his stay, Modi had a dinner meeting with Obama, but he presented White House chefs with a dilemma: he was fasting for Navaratri, a Hindu festival. At the meeting, he consumed only water.

The Indian political commentator, who met with Modi during his first term, told me that in person he was intense and inquisitive but not restless; he joked about the monkeys that were marauding his garden, and happily discussed the arcana of projects that were occupying his attention. The main one

was water: India’s groundwater reserves were declining quickly (they’ve gone down by sixty-one per cent in the past decade), and Modi was trying to prepare for a future in which the country could run dry. During the meeting, he also displayed a detailed list of nations that were in need of various professionals—lawyers, engineers, doctors—of the very kind that India, with its huge population of graduates, could provide. “He is smart, extremely focussed,” the commentator said. “And, yes, a bit puritanical.”



Not long after Modi took power, the Sohrabuddin Sheikh case, in which his old friend Amit Shah was implicated, ground to a halt.

By 2014, Shah had essentially stopped showing up for hearings. When the judge ordered Shah to appear, the case was taken away from him, in defiance of the Supreme Court.

The new judge, Brijgopal Loya, also complained about Shah’s failure to show up in court. He told his family and friends that he was under “great pressure” to dismiss the case, and that the chief justice of the Bombay High Court had offered him sixteen million dollars to scuttle it. (The chief justice could not be reached for comment.) Loya died not long after, in mysterious circumstances. The coroner’s report said that he had suffered a heart attack, but, according to *The Caravan*, a leading Indian news magazine, details in the report appeared to have been falsified. The arrangements for Loya’s body to be returned to his family were made not by government officials but by a member of the R.S.S.; it arrived spattered in blood. Loya’s family asked for an official investigation into his death but has not received one.

Shah’s case was given to a third judge, M. B. Gosavi, who after less than a month dismissed all charges, saying that he found “no sufficient ground to proceed.” Subsequent efforts to hold anyone accountable for Sohrabuddin Sheikh’s death came to nothing. As the trial of the remaining defendants approached, ninety-two witnesses turned against the prosecution, with some saying they feared for their lives; the defendants were acquitted. Rajnish Rai, the officer tasked with investigating Shah, was transferred

off the case. When he applied for early retirement, he was suspended.

By the time the charges were dropped, Modi had installed Shah as president of the B.J.P. and chairman of the governing coalition—effectively making him the country’s second most powerful man.

In 2016, after four years of trying to find a publisher for her book, Ayyub decided to publish it herself. To pay for it, she sold the gold jewelry that her mother had been saving for her wedding. “I wasn’t getting married anytime soon anyway,” she told me, laughing. She found a printer willing to reproduce the manuscript without reading it first, and cut a deal with a book distributor to share any profits. She persuaded an artist friend to design an appropriately ominous cover. Ayyub was protected by the fact that, as an English-language book, it would be read only by India’s elite, too small a group to concern the B.J.P. That May, the book went on sale on Amazon and in bookstores around the country. She called it “Gujarat Files: Anatomy of a Cover Up.”

“Gujarat Files” relates the highlights of the discussions Ayyub had with senior officials as she tried to figure out what happened during Modi’s and Shah’s time presiding over the state. It is not a polished work; it reads like a pamphlet for political insiders, rushed into publication by someone with no time to check punctuation or spell out abbreviations or delve into the historical background of the cases discussed. “I didn’t have the resources to think about all that,” Ayyub told me. “I just wanted to get the story out.” The virtue of the book is that it feels like being present at a cocktail party of Hindu nationalists, speaking frankly about long-suppressed secrets. “Here is the thing,” Ayyub said. “Everybody has heard the truth—but you can’t be sure. With my book, you can hear it from the horse’s mouth.”

Among those whom Ayyub “stung” was Ashok Narayan, who had been Gujarat’s Home Secretary during the riots. According to Ayyub, Narayan said that Modi had decided to allow the Hindu nationalists to parade the bodies of the victims of the train attack. Narayan said that he had warned Modi, “Things will go out of hand,” but to no avail. When he resisted, Modi went around him.

"Bringing the bodies to Ahmedabad flared up the whole thing, but he is the one who took the decision," he said.

Narayan added that the V.H.P.—the religious arm of the R.S.S.—had made preparations for large-scale attacks on the Muslim community and was merely looking for a pretext. "It was all planned by the V.H.P.—it was gruesome," Narayan said, adding that he believed Modi was in on the plan from the beginning. "He knew everything."

G. C. Raigar, a senior police official, told Ayyub that the initial plan was to allow the Hindus to take limited revenge for the attack. But, he said, the violence spread so quickly that Modi's government could no longer stop it: "They didn't want to use force against the rioters—which is why things went out of control."

Raigar, among others, told Ayyub that the decision to allow reprisals against Muslims was communicated outside the normal chain of command, from officials around Modi to police officers who were thought to harbor sectarian animosities. "They would tell it to people they had obliged in the past," Raigar said of the officials. "They would know who would help them."

Some of the officials spoke of the killings in a remarkably casual way, as if the Muslims had deserved to be murdered. "There were riots in '85, '87, '89, '92, and most of the times the Hindus got a beating—and the Muslims got an upper hand," P. C. Pande, Ahmedabad's former police commissioner, said. "So this time, in 2002, it had to happen, it was the retaliation of Hindus."

Pande guided Ayyub through his rationale: "Here is a group of Muslims going and setting fire on a train—so what will be your reaction?"

"You hit them back?" she said.

"Yes, you hit them back," Pande said. "Here is the chance, give it back to them. . . . Why should anybody mind?" Conversations like that, Ayyub wrote, convinced her that the riots had happened because people in power wanted them to: "It was as if the missing pieces of the jigsaw puzzle were beginning to emerge."

Several officers also said that Shah had presided over extrajudicial killings—including those of the alleged assassin Sohrabuddin Sheikh and the witnesses to his murder. The conversations about

Shah strengthened Ayyub's conviction that many more criminal suspects had been eliminated in a similar way. "It was clear that the encounters were only the tip of the iceberg," she wrote.

Initially, the reaction to Ayyub's book was muted. There was a reception in New Delhi, attended by most of the country's major political writers and editors—but Ayyub couldn't find a word about it in any paper the next day. Newspapers were slow to review the book. But it took off on its own, especially on Amazon, helped by Ayyub's reputation as a journalist. The release of a Hindi edition, in 2017, opened up a huge potential audience.

To date, Ayyub says, "Gujarat Files" has sold six hundred thousand copies and been translated into thirteen languages. Ayyub has been invited to speak at the United Nations and at journalism conferences around the world. "What makes it compelling is knowing that these are

the biggest players in what happened," Hartosh Singh Bal, the political editor of *The Caravan*, told me. "They are speaking in unguarded moments, and they are confirming and adding to the knowledge of what we have already from every other source so far. But never from this much on the inside. And suddenly we put a speaker right in the heart of the room with the people who know everything."

Perhaps the main factor that made "Gujarat Files" a sensation was the climate in which it appeared. By 2016, two years into Modi's first term, he was in the midst of a campaign to crush any voice that challenged the new order.

In April, 2018, Ayyub was sitting with a friend in a Delhi restaurant when a source alerted her to a video that was appearing in online chat groups maintained by B.J.P. supporters. He sent her the clip, and she pressed Play. What appeared on her screen was a pornographic



"But I'm conducting an experiment: will the twentieth cookie taste as good as the first?"

video purporting to show Ayyub engaging in various sex acts. “I burst into tears and threw up,” she said.

The clip went viral, making its way from WhatsApp to Facebook to Twitter, retweeted and shared countless times. Ayyub was inundated with angry messages, often with the video attached. “Hello bitch,” a man named Himanshu Verma wrote in a direct message on Facebook. “Plz suck my penis too.”

The video was the crudest salvo in a media campaign that started soon after the publication of Ayyub’s book. A tweet with a fake quote from her, asking for leniency for Muslims who had raped children, went viral. Other falsified tweets followed, including one in which she declared her hatred of India. In response, someone named Vijay Singh Chauhan wrote, “Don’t ever let me see you, or we’ll tell the whole world what we do to whores like you. Pack your bag and go to back to Pakistan.”

India’s female journalists are often subjected to an especially ugly form of abuse. The threats that Ayyub received were nearly identical to those sent to Gauri Lankesh, a journalist and book publisher from the southern state of Karnataka. Like Ayyub, Lankesh had reported aggressively on Hindu nationalism and on violence against women and lower-caste people. She had also published Ayyub’s book in Kannada, the predominant language in the state. “We were like sisters,” Ayyub told me. In September, 2017, after Lankesh endured a prolonged campaign of online attacks, two men shot her dead outside her home and fled on a motorbike.

Neha Dixit, who has done groundbreaking reporting on the B.J.P., told me that she receives death threats and sexual insults constantly: “Every day, I get three hundred notifications, with dick pics, and with conversations about how they should rape me with a steel rod or a rose thornbush or something like that.” For Dixit and other targets of these campaigns, it is especially galling that the abuse is apparently endorsed by prominent Modi allies. Ayyub showed me a tweet about the porn video from Vaibhav Aggarwal, a media personality

who often speaks on behalf of the B.J.P. It read, “U want to dance in the Rain, get all wet & not want to then have pneumonia”—a suggestion that she deserved whatever abuse she got. In June, the fake Ayyub quote about child rape was retweeted by a prominent B.J.P. member named Ashoke Pandit. The quote, which originated in English, was translated into Hindi on a Facebook page for the so-called Army of Yogi Adityanath—admirers of the B.J.P.’s Chief Minister in the state of Uttar Pradesh.

Pratik Sinha, a former software engineer and the founder of Alt News, which tracks online disinformation, described a nimble social-media operation that works on behalf of the B.J.P. In 2017, his group made a typical discovery, when a pro-B.J.P. Web site called Hindutva.info released a video of a gruesome stabbing, which was passed around on social media as evidence that Muslims were killing Hindus in Kerala. Puneet Sharma, an R.S.S. apparatchik whom Modi follows on Twitter, promoted the video, saying that it should make Hindus’ “blood boil.” But, when Alt News tracked the video to its source, it turned out to depict a gang killing in Mexico.

Sinha told me he believes that some of the most aggressive social-media posts are instigated by an unofficial “I.T. cell,” staffed and funded by B.J.P. loyalists. He said that people affiliated with the B.J.P. maintain Web sites that push pro-Modi

propaganda and attack his enemies. “They are organized and quick,” he said. “They got their act down a long time ago, in Gujarat.”

As Modi consolidated his hold on the government, he used its power to silence mainstream outlets. In 2016, his administration began moving to crush the television news network NDTV.

Since it went on the air, in

1988, the station has been one of the liveliest and most credible news channels; this spring, as votes were tallied in the general election, its Web site received 16.5 billion hits in a single day. According to two people familiar with the situation, Modi’s administration has pulled nearly all government advertising from the network—one of its primary sources of revenue—and members of his Cab-

inet have pressured private companies to stop buying ads. NDTV recently laid off some four hundred employees, a quarter of its staff. The journalists who remain say that they don’t know how long they can persist. “These are dark times,” one told me.

That year, Karan Thapar, the journalist who had asked Modi whether he wanted to express remorse for the Gujarat riots, found that no one from the B.J.P. would appear on his nightly show any longer. Thapar, perhaps the country’s most prominent television journalist, was suddenly unable to meaningfully cover politics. Then he discovered that Modi’s Cabinet members were pushing his bosses to take him off the air. “They make you toxic,” Thapar told me. “These are not things that are put in writing. They’re conversations—‘We think it’s not a good idea to have him around.’” (His network, India Today, denies being influenced by “external pressures.”) In 2017, his employers expressed reluctance to renew his contract, so he left the network.

Modi’s government has targeted enterprising editors as well. Last year, Bobby Ghosh, the editor of the *Hindustan Times*, one of the country’s most respected newspapers, ran a series tracking violence against Muslims. Modi met privately with the *Times*’ owner, and the next day Ghosh was asked to leave. In 2016, *Outlook* ran a disturbing investigation by Neha Dixit, revealing that the R.S.S. had offered schooling to dozens of disadvantaged children in the state of Assam, and then sent them to be indoctrinated in Hindu-nationalist camps on the other side of the country. According to a person with knowledge of the situation, *Outlook*’s owners—one of India’s wealthiest families, whose businesses depended on government approvals—came under pressure from Modi’s administration. “They were going to ruin their empire,” the person said. Not long after, Krishna Prasad, *Outlook*’s longtime editor, resigned.

Both Ayyub and Dixit said that no mainstream publication would sponsor their work. “So many of the really good reporters in India are freelance,” Ayyub told me. “There’s nowhere to go.” Even news that ought to cause scandal has little effect. In June, the *Business Standard* reported that Modi’s government had been inflating G.D.P.-growth figures by a factor of nearly two. The



report prompted a public outcry, but Modi did not apologize, and no official was forced to resign.

Only a few small outfits regularly offer aggressive coverage. The most prominent of them, *The Caravan* and a news site called the Wire, employ a total of about seventy journalists—barely enough to cover a large city, let alone a country of more than a billion people. In 2017, after the Wire ran a story examining questionable business dealings by Amit Shah’s son, Modi’s ministers began pressuring donors who sustain the site to stop providing funding. Shah’s son, who denied the allegations, also filed a lawsuit, which has been costly to defend. Siddharth Varadarajan, the site’s founding editor, told me that he is battling not only the government but also the compliant media. “We reckon that people in this country very much value their freedoms and democracy—and that they will realize when their freedoms are being eroded,” he said. “But a huge section of the media is busy telling them something entirely different.”

Modi’s supporters often get their news from Republic TV, which features shouting matches, public shamings, and scathing insults of all but the most slavish Modi partisans; next to it, Fox News resembles the BBC’s “News-hour.” Founded in 2017 with B.J.P. support, Republic TV stars Arnab Goswami, a floppy-haired Oxford graduate who acts as a kind of public scourge for opponents of Modi’s initiatives. In a typical program, from 2017, Goswami mentioned a law mandating that movie theatres play the national anthem, and asked whether people should be required to stand; his guest Waris Pathan, a Muslim assemblyman, argued that it should be a matter of choice. “Why can’t you stand up?” Goswami shouted at Pathan. Before Pathan could get out an answer, he yelled again, “Why can’t you stand up? What’s your problem with it?” Pathan kept trying, but Goswami, his hair flying, shouted over him. “I’ll tell you why, because—I’ll tell you why. I’ll tell you. I’ll tell you why. Can I tell you? Then why don’t you stop, and I’ll tell you why? Don’t be an anti-national! Don’t be an anti-national! Don’t be an anti-national!”

The lack of journalistic scrutiny has given Modi immense freedom to con-



“And then voilà! The same leaf you just raked up.”

trol the narrative. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the months leading up to his reelection, in 2019. Backed by his allies in business, Modi ran a campaign that was said to cost some five billion dollars. (Its exact cost is unknown, owing to weak campaign-finance laws.) As the vote approached, though, Modi was losing momentum, hampered by an underperforming economy. On February 14th, a suicide bomber crashed a car laden with explosives into an Indian military convoy in Kashmir, killing forty soldiers. The attack energized Modi: he gave a series of bellicose speeches, insisting, “The blood of the people is boiling!” He blamed the attack on Pakistan, India’s archrival, and sent thousands of troops into Kashmir. The B.J.P.’s supporters launched a social-media blitz, attacking Pakistan and hailing Modi as “a tiger.” One viral social-media post contained a telephone recording of Modi consoling a widow; it turned out that the recording had been made in 2013.

On February 26th, Modi ordered air strikes against what he claimed was a training camp for militants in the town of Balakot. Sympathetic outlets described a momentous victory: they pumped out images of a devastated landscape, and, citing official sources, claimed that three

hundred militants had been killed. But Western reporters visiting the site found no evidence of any deaths; there were only a handful of craters, a slightly damaged house, and some fallen trees. Many of the pro-Modi posts turned out to be crude fabrications. Pratik Sinha, of Alt News, pointed out that photos claiming to depict dead Pakistani militants actually showed victims of a heat wave; other images, ostensibly of the strikes, were cribbed from a video game called Arma 2.

But, in a country where hundreds of millions of people are illiterate or nearly so, the big idea got through. Modi rose in the polls and coasted to victory. The B.J.P. won a majority in the lower house of parliament, making Modi the most powerful Prime Minister in decades. Amit Shah, Modi’s deputy, told a group of election workers that the Party’s social-media networks were an unstoppable force. “Do you understand what I’m saying?” he said. “We are capable of delivering any message we want to the public—whether sweet or sour, true or fake.”

For many, Modi’s reelection suggested that he had uncovered a terrible secret at the heart of Indian society: by deploying vicious sectarian rhetoric, the country’s leader could persuade Hindus to give him nearly unchecked power. In the

following months, Modi's government introduced a series of extraordinary initiatives meant to solidify Hindu dominance. The most notable of them, along with revoking the special status of Kashmir, was a measure designed to strip citizenship from as many as two million residents of the state of Assam, many of whom had crossed the border from the Muslim nation of Bangladesh decades before. In September, the government began constructing detention centers for residents who had become illegal overnight.

A feeling of despair has settled in among many Indians who remain committed to the secular, inclusive vision of the country's founders. "Gandhi and Nehru were great, historic figures, but I think they were an aberration," Prasad, the former *Outlook* editor, told me. "It's very different now. The institutions have crumbled—universities, investigative agencies, the courts, the media, the administrative agencies, public services. And I think there is no rational answer for what has happened, except that we pretended to be what we were for fifty, sixty years. But we are now reverting to what we always wanted to be, which is to pummel minorities, to push them into a corner, to show them their places, to conquer Kashmir, to ruin the media, and to make corporations servants of the

state. And all of this under a heavy resurgence of Hinduism. India is becoming the country it has always wanted to be."

On March 31, 2017, a Muslim dairy farmer named Pehlu Khan drove to the city of Jaipur with several relatives, to buy a pair of cows for his business. On the way home, a line of men blocked the road, surrounded his truck, and accused him of planning to sell the cows for meat. Cows are considered sacred by Hindus, and most Indian states forbid killing them. But it is generally legal to eat beef from cows that have died naturally, and to make leather from their hide—jobs often performed by Muslims and lower-caste Hindus, leaving them open to false accusations. The men pulled Khan and his relatives from the truck and began beating them and shouting anti-Muslim epithets. "We showed them our papers for the cow purchase, but it did not matter," Ajmat, a nephew, said. Khan was taken to a hospital, where he died soon afterward.

Khan's relatives identified nine attackers. Most of them were members of Bajrang Dal, a branch of the R.S.S. Ostensibly a youth group, Bajrang Dal often provides muscle and security for B.J.P. members. It has also been implicated in a rash of murders of Muslims throughout the country.

In Jaipur, I met Ashok Singh, the

head of the Rajasthan chapter of Bajrang Dal. Singh told me that he and his men were duty-bound to defend cows from an epidemic of theft and killing. For several minutes, he spoke about the holiness of the cow. Each animal, he said, contains three hundred and sixty million gods, and even its dung has elixirs beneficial to humans. "They cut them, they kill them," Singh said of Muslims. "It's a conspiracy." He admitted that Bajrang Dal members had taken part in stopping Khan, but he insisted that other people had committed the murder. "There was a mob," he said. "We didn't have control of it."

The attackers identified by Khan's relatives were arrested and charged, but local sentiment ran strongly in their favor. After the prosecutor declined to introduce any eyewitness testimony or cell-phone videos into evidence, all the attackers were acquitted. "The case was rigged," Kasim Khan, a lawyer for the family, told me. "The outcome was decided before the trial."

According to FactChecker, an organization that tracks communal violence by surveying media reports, there have been almost three hundred hate crimes motivated by religion in the past decade—almost all of them since Modi became Prime Minister. Hindu mobs have killed dozens of Muslim men. The murders, which are often instigated by Bajrang Dal members, have become known as "lynchings," evoking the terror that swept the American South after Reconstruction. The lynchings take place against a backdrop of hysteria created by the R.S.S. and its allies—a paranoid narrative of a vast majority, nearly a billion strong, being victimized by a much smaller minority.

When Muslims are lynched, Modi typically says nothing, and, since he rarely holds press conferences, he is almost never asked about them. But his supporters often salute the killers. In June, 2017, a Muslim man named Alimuddin Ansari, who was accused of cow trafficking, was beaten to death in the village of Ramgarh. Eleven men, including a local leader of the B.J.P., were convicted of murder, but last July they were freed, pending appeal. On their release, eight of them were met by Jayant Sinha, the B.J.P. Minister for Civil Aviation. Sinha, a Harvard graduate and a former con-



"I know I should have gotten a cart, but I can't give up now."

sultant for McKinsey & Company, draped the men in marigold garlands and presented them with sweets. “All I am doing is honoring the due process of law,” he said at the time.

In northern India, Hindu nationalists have whipped up panic around the idea that Muslim men are engaging in a secret campaign to seduce Hindu women into marriage and prostitution. As with the hysteria over cow killings, the furor takes form mostly on social media and platforms like WhatsApp, where rumors spread indiscriminately. The idea—known as “love jihad”—is rooted in an image of the oversexed Muslim male, fortified by beef and preying on desirable Hindu women. In many areas, any Muslim man seen with a Hindu woman risks being attacked. Two years ago, Yogi Adityanath, the B.J.P. Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, set up “anti-Romeo squads,” which harassed Muslim men believed to be trying to seduce Hindu women. The squads were abandoned after the gangs mistakenly beat up several Hindu men.

In a village in Haryana, I spoke with a young Hindu woman named Ayesha. A year before, she had met a Muslim man named Omar, a purveyor of spiritual medicine who had been visiting her home to treat her mother. They fell in love, and decided that Ayesha would convert to Islam and they would get married. Her family was horrified, she said. One night, Ayesha ran off with Omar to his village, a few miles away, where they got married in a mosque, and moved in with his relatives. For several months, Ayesha said, her family tried to persuade her to get a divorce; at one point, her father brought her a pistol and a suicide note to sign. “I was so sad, I almost agreed,” she said.

One night, as Omar rode his bicycle, two men followed on scooters. One of them pulled out a gun and shot Omar dead. Ayesha remained with Omar’s family, saying she will never go back to her own. “I am one hundred per cent certain that my family is responsible for my husband’s death,” she said.

When Ayyub was a child, a group of men gathered every morning for prayer and martial arts in a field down the street from her home. The men formed a local chapter of the R.S.S., and sometimes chanted slogans cele-

brating Hindu supremacy: “Hail, Mother India.” The men were friendly, she recalled—eager to recruit Muslims. But she had learned in school that an R.S.S. acolyte had killed Gandhi, so she and her brother, Aref, kept their distance. “We would watch with fascination,” she said. “But I didn’t like being there.”

Early one morning in Ahmedabad, on a playground at Ellisbridge Municipal School No. 12, I looked on as a dozen men raised the saffron flag of the R.S.S. They ranged in age from eighteen to sixty-three, and were all trim and fit, many of them wearing the group’s signature khaki shorts. They began with yoga poses and calisthenics. Then they took out long wooden rods and began to perform martial exercises. (An R.S.S. chief once said that the group’s cadres could be assembled to fight more quickly than the Indian Army.) The men moved together, stepping and striking in formation. “One-two-three-four, one-two-three-four,” their leader cried. “Don’t think you’re an expert—I’m seeing a lot of mistakes.”

The men finished in a semicircle on the ground, offering prayers to the Hindu sun god: “O Surya, the shining one, the radiant one, dispeller of darkness, source of life.” They ended by shouting, “Victory to India!”

Afterward, the men—who included an engineer, a lawyer, a garment merchant, and a police officer—laughed and clapped one another on the back. Together they made up the Paldi chapter of the R.S.S., one of more than thirty thousand across India. Paldi is an overwhelmingly Hindu neighborhood, but the nearest Muslim enclave, which came under attack in 2002, is less than a mile away. On this morning, there wasn’t much talk of politics. “I’m just here to stay fit,” Nehal Burasin, a student, told me.

For a fuller explanation of the R.S.S.’s world view, I spoke to Sudhanshu Trivedi, a lifelong member who is now the B.J.P.’s national spokesman. Over dinner at the Ambassador Hotel in Delhi, Trivedi told me that the R.S.S. is dedicated to the propagation of “Hindutva”: the idea that India is first and foremost a nation for Hindus. It is, he said, by far the largest organization of its kind in the world. In its ninety-four-year existence, the R.S.S. has embedded itself in every aspect of Indian society.

Between bites of salad, Trivedi rat-

tled off R.S.S. talking points. The organization says that it runs some thirty thousand primary and secondary schools; that it administers hospitals across India, especially in remote areas; and that it maintains the second-largest network of trade unions in the country, the largest network of farmers, the largest social-welfare organization working in the slums. The B.J.P., India’s dominant political party, came last in his litany. “So, you can see, in the entire scheme of things, compared to what the R.S.S. is doing, what the B.J.P. is doing is small,” he said. In fact, the R.S.S. was rapidly becoming a state within a state—capturing India from within. Over the summer, the organization announced that it was establishing a school to train young people to become officers in the armed forces. This year, more than a hundred and fifty former officers and enlisted men signed a letter decrying the “completely unacceptable” use of the military for political purposes. They referred to Modi’s taking credit for the cross-border strikes in Pakistan, and to the boast by some B.J.P. politicians that it was “Modi’s army.”

The key to understanding modern India, Trivedi told me, was accepting that “Hinduism is not basically a religion—it is a way of life.” Anyone born in India is part of Hinduism. Therefore, all the other religions found in India thrive because of Hinduism, and are subordinate to it. “The culture of Islam is preserved here because of Hindu civilization,” he said.

As part of the Hindutva project, B.J.P. leaders have been rewriting school textbooks across the country, erasing much of its Islamic history, including that of the Mughals, Muslim emperors who ruled India for three centuries. The B.J.P. has changed Mughal place names to ones that are Hindu-influenced. Last year, the Mughalsarai railway station, built in central India a century and a half ago, was renamed for Deen Dayal Upadhyaya, a right-wing Hindu-nationalist leader. Allahabad, a city of more than a million people, is now called Prayagraj, a Sanskrit word that denotes a place of sacrifice. In November, the old story of Ayodhya was in the news again, when India’s Supreme Court cleared the way for a Hindu temple to be constructed on the former site of Babri Masjid. In a

thousand-page decision, the Court provided no evidence that a temple had been destroyed to build the mosque, and acknowledged that the mosque had been torn down by an angry mob. Nevertheless, it handed control of the land to a government trust, effectively allowing the B.J.P. to proceed.

Trivedi told me that no one in the R.S.S. bore any animus toward Islam. But, he said, it was important to understand just how far the faith had fallen. “In India, the most educated community is the Parsis, which is a minority. The second most educated is the Christians, which is a minority. The most prosperous is the Jains, which is a minority. The most entrepreneurial is Sikh, which is a minority. The first nuclear scientist in India was a Parsi—a minority,” he said. “Then what is the problem with Muslims? I will tell you. They have become captives of the jihadi ideology.”

When Ayyub and the photographer were detained at the hospital in Srinagar, I found a hiding place across the street, screened by a wall and a fruit vender; Ayyub would have faced serious repercussions if she was found to have snuck in a foreigner. After about an hour, they emerged. Ayyub said that an intelligence officer had questioned them intently, then released them with an admonition: “Don’t come back.”

The next morning, we drove to the village of Parigam, near the site of the suicide attack that prompted Modi’s air strikes against Pakistan. We’d heard that Indian security forces had swept through the town and detained several men. The insurgency has broad support in the villages outside the capital, and the road to Parigam was marked by the sandbags and razor wire of Indian Army checkpoints. For most of the way, the roads were otherwise deserted.

In the village, Ayyub stopped the car to chat with locals. Within a few minutes, she’d figured out whom we should talk to first: Shabbir Ahmed, the proprietor of a local bakery. We found him sitting cross-legged on his porch, shell-ing almonds into a huge pile. In interviews, Ayyub slows down from her usual debate-team pace; she took a spot on the porch as if she had dropped by for a visit. Ahmed, who is fifty-five, told her that, during the sweeps, an armored

vehicle rumbled up to his home just past midnight one night. A dozen soldiers from the Rashtriya Rifles, an elite counter-insurgency unit of the Indian Army, rushed out and began smashing his windows. When Ahmed and his two sons came outside, he said, the soldiers hauled the young men into the street and began beating them. “I was screaming for help, but nobody came out,” Ahmed said. “Everyone was too afraid.”

Ahmed’s sons joined us on the porch. One of them, Muzaffar, said that the soldiers had been enraged by young people who throw rocks at their patrols. They dragged Muzaffar down the street toward a mosque. “Throw stones at the mosque like you throw stones at us,” one of the soldiers commanded him.

Muzaffar said that he and his brother, Ali, were taken to a local base, where the soldiers shackled them to chairs and beat them with bamboo rods. “They kept asking me, ‘Do you know any stone throwers?’—and I kept saying I don’t know any, but they kept beating me,” he said. When Muzaffar fainted, he said, a soldier attached electrodes to his legs and stomach and jolted him with an electrical current. Muzaffar rolled up his pants to reveal patches of burned skin on the back of his leg. It went on like that for some time, he said: he would pass out, and when he regained consciousness the beating started again. “My body was going into spasms,” he said, and began to cry.

After Muzaffar and Ali were released, their father took them to the local hospital. “They have broken my bones,”



Muzaffar said. “I can no longer prostrate myself before God.”

It was impossible to verify the brothers’ tale, but, as with many accounts that Ayyub and I heard in the valley, the anguish was persuasive. “I am a slightly more civilized version of these people,” Ayyub told me. “I see what’s happening—with the propaganda, with the lies,

what the government is doing to people. Their issues are way more extensive—their lives. But I have everything in common with these people. I feel their pain.”

One afternoon, Ayyub and I walked through Soura, a hardscrabble neighborhood in Srinagar’s old city which has been the site of several confrontations with security forces. By the time we got there, the police and the Army had withdrawn, evidently deciding that the narrow streets left their men too vulnerable. The locals told us that they regarded Soura as liberated territory and vowed to attack anyone from the government who tried to enter. Every wall seemed plastered with graffiti. One bit of scrawl said, “Demographic change is not acceptable!”

The Kashmiris we met felt trapped, their voices stifled. “The news that is true—they never show it,” Yunus, a shop owner, said of the Indian media. Days before, his thirteen-year-old son, Ashiq, had been arrested and beaten by security forces, just as he himself had been thirty years before. “Nobody has ever asked the people of Kashmir what they want—whether to stay with India or join Pakistan or become independent,” he said. “We have heard so many promises. We have lifted bodies with our hands, lifted heads that are separate, lifted legs that are separate, and put them all together into graves.”

Many Kashmiris still refuse to accept Indian sovereignty, and some recall the promise, made by the United Nations in 1948, that a plebiscite would determine the future of the state. Kashmir was assigned special status—enshrined in Article 370—and afforded significant powers of self-rule. For the most part, those powers have never been realized. Beginning in the late eighties, an armed insurgency, supported by Pakistan, has turned the area into a battleground. The conflict in Kashmir is largely a war of ambush and reprisal; the insurgents strike the Indian security forces, and the security forces crack down. Groups like Human Rights Watch have detailed abuses on both sides, but especially by the Indian government.

The R.S.S. and other Hindu nationalists have claimed that the efforts to assuage the Kashmiris created a self-defeating dynamic. The insurgency has stifled economic development, they said;

Article 370 was curtailing investment and migration, dooming the place to backwardness. Modi's decision to revoke the article seemed the logical endpoint of the R.S.S. world view: the Kashmiri deadlock would be broken by overwhelming Hindu power.

As Ayyub and I drove around Kashmir, it seemed unclear how the Indian government intended to proceed. Economic activity had ground to a halt. Schools were closed. Kashmiris were cut off from the outside world and from one another. "We are overwhelmed by cases of depression," a physician in Srinagar told us. Many Kashmiris warned that an explosion was likely the moment the security measures were lifted. "Modi is doing what he did in Gujarat twenty years ago, when he ran a tractor over the Muslims there," a woman named Dushdaya said.

The newspaper columnist Pratap Bhanu Mehta wrote that, in Kashmir, "Indian democracy is failing." He suggested that the country's Muslims, who have largely resisted radicalization, would conclude that they had nothing else to turn to. "The B.J.P. thinks it is going to Indianise Kashmir," he wrote. "Instead, what we will see is potentially the Kashmirisation of India: The story of Indian democracy written in blood and betrayal."

In Srinagar, Ayyub and I visited the neighborhood of Mehju Nagar, which many young men have left to join the militants. The talk on the street was of a couple named Nazeer and Fehmeeda, whose son, Momin, had been taken away in the crackdown. Armed men from the Central Reserve Police Force came to the door late one night. A masked civilian—evidently an informer—pointed at Momin. The soldiers took him away.

We found Fehmeeda at her house, kneeling on the floor of an unadorned main room. The morning after the raid, she told us, she went to a C.R.P.F. base, where her son was being held. He told her that he'd been beaten. "I begged them to give him back to me, but they wouldn't consider it," she said. When Fehmeeda returned the following day, the police told her that Momin had been transferred to the city's central jail. But guards there said that he'd been transferred to a prison in Uttar Pradesh, on the other side of the country. "There's no use crying, Auntie," they told her.

Fehmeeda said that she was not told



what charges had been filed against Momin; Indian antiterrorism law allows the security forces to detain any Kashmiri for any reason, or no reason, for up to two years. In the three decades that Kashmir has been in open rebellion, tens of thousands of men have disappeared, and many have not returned. "I must accept that I will not see him again," she said.

At Fehmeeda's house, her friends had gathered around her, while men from the neighborhood stood outside open windows. Ayyub sat facing her, their knees touching. As Fehmeeda spoke, some of the men talked over her, and each time Ayyub told them to shut up: "Don't scold her, Uncle, she has problems of her own."

Fehmeeda had begun stoically, but gradually she lost her composure. Ayyub gripped her hands and said, "Your son will return to you. God is very big." Fehmeeda was not consoled. Momin, a construction worker, had paid for the entire

family's needs, including her medicine for a kidney ailment. Fehmeeda's thoughts began to tumble out in fragments: "I told him, don't throw stones, somebody took him, somebody was paid—" Then she started to sob and heave. Ayyub began to cry, too. "I can't take any more," she said. "This is too much."

Ayyub said goodbye to Fehmeeda, promising to return with medicine for her kidneys. (A few weeks later, she did.) We were both gripped by a sense of foreboding, that we were witnessing the start of something that would last many years. "I feel this as a Muslim," Ayyub said. "It's happening everywhere in India."

We rode in silence for a while. I suggested that maybe it was time for her to leave India—that Muslims didn't have a future there. But Ayyub was going through a notebook. "I'm not leaving," she said. "I have to stay. I'm going to write all this down and tell everyone what happened." ♦

THE ENCHANTER

By eluding the art world, David Hammons has conquered it.

BY CALVIN TOMKINS

In the summer of 2014, a year before the Whitney Museum of American Art reopened to the public in its new, downtown quarters on Gansevoort Street, David Hammons and several other artists were invited to walk through the unfinished galleries. The Whitney curators Scott Rothkopf and Donna de Salvo were planning a sequence of exhibitions that would inaugurate the fifth floor as an open, undivided space, and Hammons was an obvious but impossible candidate: an internationally renowned African-American artist who, during the past four decades, had risen to the summit of the art world by following his own rules, one of which was to turn down invitations from leading museums. Hammons was standing near the big fifth-floor windows that overlooked the Hudson when Adam Weinberg, the Whitney's director, joined him.

"I had met David, but I didn't really know him," Weinberg told me recently. "He was looking at the river, so I went over and said, 'You know, Gordon Matta-Clark did his famous pier cut right down there.'" Weinberg was referring to five large openings that Matta-Clark had cut in the walls, roof, and floor of an abandoned pier shed in 1975, turning it into an immense public art work. (Both the shed and the pier were demolished in 1979.) "David didn't say anything," Weinberg recalled. "But a few days later we got a small drawing by him in the mail, with no explanation, no message of any kind." The drawing showed, in schematic outline, the metal framework of a long, rectangular structure, a sort of ghost image of the pier, floating on water. Under it was the pencilled caption "Gordon Matta-Clark Monument Pier 52."

Neither Weinberg nor Rothkopf knew what to make of it. Was this a

proposal? Or was it a whim on Hammons's part, a thank-you note for being invited on the gallery tour? So much was going on at the museum in the period leading up to the opening that the mailing went unanswered for some time. Over the next year, though, Rothkopf had several exploratory meetings with Hammons, and in the summer of 2015 the Whitney began preliminary studies for an immense structure based on Hammons's drawing, fifty-two feet high by three hundred and twenty-five feet long, made of stainless-steel rods. In September, in a groundbreaking ceremony at the museum, Weinberg announced to about two hundred and fifty art-world insiders that work was about to begin on David Hammons's "Day's End," a project that "has taken not a village but literally a city to realize." Hammons was present, a slight figure in loose, earth-toned clothes, with his wife, Chie. The famously reclusive artist had worked with the Whitney's performance curator, Adrienne Edwards, in planning the ceremony, which included a fireboat on the river deploying its water cannons to spectacular effect, and six musicians performing a new jazz suite by the composer Henry Threadgill. Hammons had agreed to say a few words. Standing next to him, I could see his long fingers with their elegantly squared-off nails folding and unfolding a scrap of paper, but when Weinberg walked over to offer him the mike he shook his head. "David's actually a very shy man," Weinberg explained later.

It had taken the museum four years to negotiate the necessary permits and authorizations from the city, the state, the Hudson River Park Trust, the Army Corps of Engineers, and other official bodies, and to raise the seventeen million dollars that "Day's End" was ex-

pected to cost. A few Whitney Museum trustees questioned the wisdom of taking on such an expensive public art work, which the Whitney would not own—it's on city property—but which it would have to maintain. Weinberg is a world-class persuader, though, and a majority of the trustees and a surprising number of benefactors and city officials fell in love with Hammons's ghost pier. One side of the structure will be on land; the other sides will rest on steel piles in the river. Guy Nordenson, the chief engineer, plans to complete it by next fall. Inspired by the project, the city has cleared the Gansevoort Peninsula, the piece of land adjoining the former pier, of storage sheds and utility buildings that were being used by the Department of Sanitation, and the landscape-architecture firm James Corner Field Operations will soon start turning the peninsula into a five-and-a-half-acre public park, with a sandy beach and a landing for kayaks.

Hammons, whose eight-and-a-half-by-eleven-inch drawing could be said to have precipitated both projects, has played a quiet and somewhat gnomic role in the first one's realization. He attended about a dozen meetings at the museum, during which he struck Nordenson as being "like a Zen master, enigmatic and unexpected." He wore a hat, usually a round felt one with holes cut into it, and looked through "third eye" glasses, whose delicate wire frames held a single small lens, centrally positioned between his eyebrows. When asked to make a decision, he was firm and precise. Should the structure be lighted at night? No, Hammons said, it should disappear. "One thing David made absolutely clear was that it had to be on the exact same site as the pier that had been there," Weinberg told me. "And the only reason we

David Hammons's "Oh say can you see," from 2017, photographed at the artist's studio in Yonkers.





got permission to do it was that it was on the exact same site. He wanted the steel rods to be as minimal and pared down as we could make them. 'A great tailor makes the fewest cuts,' he'd say. When a question came up at a meeting, Hammons occasionally said, 'What would Gordon do?'" His title for the work, "Day's End," was what Matta-Clark had called his pier cut. Weinberg sometimes had the impression that Hammons was submerging his identity in Matta-Clark's. Hammons's generosity to other black artists—buying their work, helping them gain recognition—is unending, although little known. In this case, he was paying homage to a dead white artist whom he had never met.

David Hammons and Gordon Matta-Clark were both born in 1943. They showed their work in New York galleries during the nineteen-seventies, but in those days artists of color barely registered on the mainstream art scene. Matta-Clark was born into it. His father, the Chilean Surrealist Roberto Matta, had joined the exodus of artists from Paris to New York in the

early years of the Second World War. He had married an American art student named Anne Clark, but the birth of their twin sons, Gordon and Sebastian, so unhinged him that he fled marriage and parenthood, and returned to France soon after the war. The boys grew up in New York. Gordon, who added his mother's name to his own in 1971, eventually reconnected with his mercurial father. He interrupted his architectural studies at Cornell to spend a year in Paris, taking courses in French literature at the Sorbonne, and he later decided, as his father had, to abandon architecture for art.

New York in the seventies was a great place for young artists exploring far-out ideas. Rents were low, and the city, after nearly going bankrupt, was full of abandoned buildings and uncollected garbage. Matta-Clark responded by developing his own art form, called "anarchitecture," which initially consisted of chainsawing sections out of derelict buildings and presenting them as sculptures. For "Splitting," his breakthrough work, from 1974, Matta-Clark and two assistants gained access to a suburban house in Englewood, New

Jersey—it was scheduled for demolition—and sawed it in half, from roof to basement. (Widely circulated photographs of the bisected house had a powerful impact on many artists, including David Hammons.) Matta-Clark was a galvanizing presence in the downtown art world. He co-founded an artist-run restaurant, called Food, at the corner of Prince and Wooster Streets, in SoHo (Hammons went there a few times), and he helped start one of the first nonprofit, "alternate" spaces to show art, at 112 Greene Street. "Gordon was smart and funny and mischievous and quite adorable," Alanna Heiss, who founded the Clocktower Gallery and PS1, told me. When he decided to cut holes in Pier 52, at the end of Gansevoort Street, he was acting on his own, without permits or authorization. The waterfront there had been in decline for years. Several of the piers were no longer in use, and had become gathering places for the gay community; Matta-Clark's hope was that his light-pierced shed, with its huge, west-facing "rose window" that framed the sunset, could be part of this subculture. That didn't happen, because two municipal inspectors appeared at the site one day and shut it down, citing unauthorized use of city property. Matta-Clark, fearing arrest and prosecution, fled to Paris, where he and a colleague, with full permission from the city, bored a very large round hole through an ancient house in the area around Les Halles. His expanding career was cut tragically short three years later, when he died of pancreatic cancer at the age of thirty-five. His brilliant but troubled twin, Sebastian, who never found his way in the world, had died two years earlier, after falling from a window in Gordon's New York studio.

David Hammons's art, which also made use of urban detritus, resonated with the pain, anger, and absurdity of being a black man in the United States. Born in Springfield, Illinois, he was the youngest of ten children in a very poor family. They lived with their mother in a small house near the railroad tracks, and survived on her earnings from a variety of menial jobs—their absentee father dropped in on the family once or twice a year. When Hammons was twenty, he moved to Los Angeles. He

lived with an older sister, worked at odd jobs, and took classes in commercial art and design. Hammons's interest soon shifted to fine art. He studied at the Chouinard Art Institute (which later became the California Institute of the Arts) and then at the Otis College of Art and Design, a small private school in Los Angeles. Charles White, an African-American artist whose powerful, realistic paintings and prints had not yet been recognized by the white establishment, was teaching at Otis, and he became a mentor to Hammons. "I never knew there were 'black' painters, or artists, or anything until I found out about him," Hammons once said. White let him attend night classes at Otis from 1968 to 1972, free of charge—he was never officially enrolled—and Hammons began the series of "body prints" that launched his career.

Coating his head and body with margarine, he pressed the greased areas down on large sheets of paper and dusted the resulting image with powdered pigment. (Hammons readily acknowledges that he borrowed the idea from the French artist Yves Klein's slightly earlier Anthropometries, in which nude women, their bodies slathered with blue paint, became "living brushes.") Many of the prints included drawn or collaged elements, and most of them bore witness to racial oppression. "Injustice Case" (1970), the most famous one, shows a black man sitting in a chair (not Hammons—he had started using bodies other than his own), gagged and bound, his head thrown back, in an obvious reference to the Black Panther activist Bobby Seale at his trial, in Chicago, for conspiracy and inciting a riot at the 1968 Democratic Convention. (The image is framed in an American flag, twisted into a ropelike fabric; the flag makes an ironic appearance in several other prints.) "Injustice Case" now hangs in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, whose director, Michael Govan, ranks it among the most important works in the collection. "If I had to pick an icon for American art, that would have to be at the top of the list," Govan told me.

The spade series came next. "I was trying to figure out why black people were called spades as opposed to clubs," Hammons said in 1986, to the art historian Kellie Jones. "I remember being

called a spade once, and I didn't know what it meant; nigger I knew but spade I still don't." His silk-screen paintings and body prints of black faces and playing-card spades led to sculptures made of rusted-out garden shovels, wrapped with chains or reborn as African masks. Hammons turned the racist slur into a mockery of racism. He jammed a cutoff shovel handle into the mouthpiece of a saxophone and called it "Bird," for the jazzman Charlie Parker. Black Power and the Black Arts Movement were gaining momentum in the seventies, and a new generation of African-American artists had emerged in L.A.—Betye Saar, John Outterbridge, Noah Purifoy, and Hammons's friend Senga Nengudi, among others. Hammons's work appeared in two small Los Angeles galleries and in group shows at LACMA and at the California Institute of the Arts. The body prints sold so quickly, some of them for up to a thousand dollars, that Hammons, who distrusted the market, decided to stop making them.

In 1975, he had his first New York show, at Just Above Midtown (JAM), on Fifty-seventh Street—a new space, which its director, Linda Goode Bryant, had started to present artists of color. Although Romare Bearden, Jacob Lawrence, and Charles White, the leading black artists of the previous generation, had shown in New York galleries, until the mid-eighties the art world there remained overwhelmingly



white and predominantly male. Bryant, one of the first to challenge that imbalance, became a mother superior to any number of young artists, including Hammons. She was impressed by his insatiable curiosity. "David would spend hours and hours on the street, watching people and letting it all filter into him," she recalled. "Once, when he was having a show at JAM, he installed a piece on the ceiling of the gallery and refused to have anything that

identified it. 'The only people that should see it are the ones who see it,' he said. He really does work that is intended to make us see."

Hammons called his JAM show "Greasy Bags and Barbecue Bones," a sardonic title that accurately described the content—grease-stained paper bags and gnawed ribs sprinkled with glitter, along with pyramids of hair that he had collected from Harlem barbershops. During the next few years, Hammons made frequent, extended trips to New York. He had two more shows at JAM, and produced a lot of hard-to-sell work: empty wine bottles (Night Train, the poor man's choice) glued together or impaled on tree limbs in vacant lots; "rock heads," found stones capped with hair; elephant dung, painted and wrapped with chains; wires threaded with hair, which he planted, reedlike, on Los Angeles beaches; delicately beautiful wall pieces called "Flight Fantasies," whose elements were broken and melted records, reeds, eggshells, wire, and hair. Hammons's uncanny ability to put found objects together in ways that evoked meaning and emotion was reminiscent of Robert Rauschenberg's early work. He believed there was spiritual energy in everyday elements of black street culture. "I was actually going insane working with hair," he said, in the 1986 interview with Kellie Jones. "That's how potent it is." With the wine bottles, "a black person's lips have touched each and every one . . . so you have to be very, very careful." Hammons had sought out Robert Farris Thompson, the Yale historian of African art and culture, whose 1983 book, "Flash of the Spirit," dealt with the art, music, and architecture of six African civilizations—Yoruba, Kongo, Ejagham, Ewe, Fon, and Mande. "You have to go back to what we were before you go forward to what we want to be," Hammons had said to Thompson, as Thompson recalls in a 1992 essay. "I be into memory, more than the avant-garde."

By 1980, after several years of dividing his time between Los Angeles and New York, Hammons was living permanently in New York. His work had changed radically, from images that reflected or commented on black life to street actions, provocations, and found objects. Two of his street actions,

both in 1981, involved Richard Serra's "T.W.U.," a massive, steel-plate sculpture that had been installed in Tribeca a year or so earlier. Unloved by the community, it was regularly defaced by graffiti. In "Pissed Off," Hammons urinated on one of the towering steel plates, and, in "Shoe Tree," he and an accomplice lobbed tied-together shoes at the top edge until they caught and hung there. Both actions took place at night, and were documented (at Hammons's request) by the photographer Dawoud Bey, whose camera also captured an amused-looking police officer talking with Hammons beside "T.W.U."

"Higher Goals," a basketball net at the top of a fifty-five-foot pole that was decorated with hundreds of bottle caps, went up on an empty lot in Harlem in 1983. It was the first of many basketball-themed art works by Hammons, whose own hoop dreams died when he stopped growing at five feet eight. His street actions were anonymous—they appeared without warning, and people learned about them by word of mouth or from Bey's photographs. On a cold winter morning in 1983, Hammons placed a rug on the sidewalk outside Cooper Union, and laid out ten rows of perfectly formed snowballs in graduated sizes. Hammons and his snowballs stayed there all day, and, aside from Bey, who took a lot of pictures, the people who saw them were street merchants and passersby—local shoppers, women pushing baby strollers, art students and others, some of whom stopped to laugh, or to ask the price (a dollar a snowball, regardless of size), and in some cases—this being New York—to buy one.

Thirty-six years later, "Bliz-aard Ball Sale" (the title he subsequently gave to the snowball action) is Hammons's most famous art work. Elena Filipovic, the director of the Kunsthalle Basel, published a fine book about it in 2017, which also sheds light on Hammons's other work and on his life. The snowballs tapped into the iconoclastic spirit of Marcel Duchamp, who once peddled his "Rotoreliefs," small disks that formed a visual image when turned on a Victrola, at an inventors' fair in Paris. Echoes of Duchamp are everywhere in Hammons's work: puns and wordplay; irreverent humor; urinals and dust and everyday

objects used as readymade art materials; the artist's withdrawal from the art market, while bending it to his needs. Hammons's "The Holy Bible: Old Testament" is a copy of Arturo Schwarz's "The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp," rebound in black leather. "I am the C.E.O. of the D.O.C.—the Duchamp Outpatient Clinic," Hammons told the art critic Peter Schjeldahl, in 2002. "We have a vaccine for that smartness virus that's been in the art world for the last fifty years." When I asked Hammons about the quote—did it suggest a struggle to escape the Master's shadow?—he smiled and said, quietly, "You never get free of Duchamp. He's always there."

The word "elusive" sticks to Hammons like a Homeric epithet. He's the cat who goes his own way, refuses interviews, doesn't attend his openings, and avoids the art world. But this was not always the case. In Los Angeles, Hammons was a charismatic figure in the Black Arts Movement. His studio on Slauson Avenue became a meeting place for black artists, many of whom were interested in performative processes and sculptural forms derived from African traditions. After he moved to New York, he was an artist-in-residence at the Studio Museum in Harlem, where his influence on black artists was immediate. "David gave artists—and not just black artists—a new way of imagining what an art practice could be," Naomi Beckwith, who was then a curator at the Studio Museum, told me. It was influence by example, because Hammons was becoming more and more elusive. Like most people who know and admire him, the artist and writer Arthur Jafa does not feel that he can call Hammons a friend. "For me, personally, he's more like an older brother—a brother who doesn't give you the attention you want but you're too cool to ask for," Jafa told me. In 2004, the Studio Museum began flying a new iteration of Hammons's 1990 "African American Flag"—its red, green, and black stars and stripes echo the ones in Marcus Garvey's black-liberation flag—above its entrance. His continuing influence was recognized in a 2009 group show there, organized by Beckwith and called "30 Seconds Off an Inch"—the title came from a Ham-

mons comment about vernacular carpentry, where "nothing fits but everything works." Most of the seventy-one artists represented came to the opening, and so, for once, did Hammons.

In the eighties, Hammons received consistent recognition from the arts establishment—grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Guggenheim Foundation, commissions from the Public Art Fund and Creative Time. In 1989, the Washington Project for the Arts sponsored "How Ya Like Me Now?," his billboard-size image of Jesse Jackson (who had run for President the year before) with white skin, yellow hair, and blue eyes. It was installed in a parking lot across from the National Portrait Gallery, where a group of young black men, incensed by what struck them as a racist insult, attacked it with sledgehammers—an event that drew national news coverage. None of this kept Hammons far from the edge of poverty. For several years in that decade, living by himself in a Harlem studio, he had no bank account, no credit card, no telephone, and no hot water. To get in touch with him, you sent out "smoke signals," as the curator Philippe Vergne described it, and Hammons might or might not send back instructions to call the pay phone on the street outside his studio at a specified time. He took showers in friends' apartments, and survived on grants and occasional sales of his work to A. C. Hudgins, an African-American financial investor who was his first real supporter, and one or two others. In 1990, he won the Prix de Rome, and spent much of the year living at the American Academy there. He showed new work in Rome, Venice, and the town of Temse, Belgium, where he mounted porcelain urinals (Duchamp, ahoy!) on trees in a wooded area. Back in New York, he had two shows in quick succession at the Jack Tilton Gallery—Tilton had roomed across the hall from Hudgins at Babson College. The second Tilton show featured used fur coats draped over blocks of ice.

The real turning point came late in 1990, with "Rousing the Rubble," Hammons's retrospective exhibition at PS1, the large contemporary-art space that Alanna Heiss had founded in a former public school in Long Island City. The show, organized by Tom Finkelpearl,

PS1's director, travelled to museums in Philadelphia and San Diego and led to a MacArthur Fellowship and to rising prices for his work. In 1992, the Whitney paid a hundred thousand dollars for "Untitled," a massive sculpture in which lengths of construction rebar coated with hair spring like dreadlocks from a base of large stones. The Whitney curator Elisabeth Sussman, who had recommended the purchase, ached to put Hammons in the 1993 Whitney Biennial, which she was co-curating, but Hammons, who had previously turned down a number of Whitney Biennials, wouldn't allow it. "He was already a myth to black artists," Sussman recalls. "It was all 'Why do I want to be in a Biennial?'"

After "Rousing the Rubble," he didn't have another exhibition in New York for twelve years. He continued to show in Europe, though, and, in 1998, he made his first trip to Japan. The Gallery Shimada, in Yamaguchi, was presenting his work, and he stayed there long enough to become deeply impressed by Shintoism and by Japanese culture. For his second show at the Gallery Shimada, in 2001, he placed a huge boulder in the bed of a truck, planted a garden around it, and drove around the city. Nobody seems to know exactly when Hammons met his second wife, Chie Hasegawa, the Japanese-born artist, but it was in New York, where she had lived for some time. (There had been an earlier marriage, in Los Angeles, and two children.) They have been together for more than a decade, and every year they spend a month or two in Japan.

Hammons produces a lot of art. Always wary of dealers and galleries, he began, in the early nineties, to work with Lois Plehn, a dedicated, market-savvy art collector. For nearly three decades, she has handled virtually all of Hammons's connections with the outside world. What their arrangement is, or if they have one, is unknown, but she acts as his manager and his bulwark against people he doesn't want to see. Having dispensed with galleries (and their forty-to-fifty-per-cent cut of all sales), Hammons was in financial territory that most artists have no urge to explore. But he thrives on the freedom of his lone-wolf status. He tantalized the Whitney, in 1997, by allowing "Phat



Hammons in Harlem, in 1982, in a photograph taken by his friend Dawoud Bey.

Free," a seven-minute, inexplicably riveting video of Hammons kicking a bucket along an empty Harlem street, to appear in that year's Biennial. But there has been no softening in his attitude toward museums. He thinks museums should buy work from artists early, when they need help, not just wait for wealthy collectors to give it to them. "The Whitney needs me, but I don't need the Whitney," he told Kellie Jones, who has continued to write about him. (Her father was the poet LeRoi Jones, who changed his name, in 1968, to Amiri Baraka.) Chrissie Iles, a Whitney curator, and Philippe Vergne, who was then

at the Walker Art Center, were determined to have Hammons in the 2006 Whitney Biennial, which they were curating together. Public anger over the Iraq War was building, and Iles and Vergne, who wanted their show to reflect the political climate, had invited a lot of politically aware young artists. "David was really the key for us, the artist who had consistently questioned whiteness and the white power structures," Iles told me. Nothing by Hammons was in the Biennial. A persistent rumor spread, however, that a painting called "RU Legal," by the jazz legend (and amateur painter) Miles Davis, was there on loan

from Hammons. Vergne told me that a viewer had challenged him when he was giving a gallery tour, saying that he knew the painting had come from David Hammons. Vergne said, "If you want to believe that, it's your right."

The Museum of Modern Art has the most significant collection of Hammons work in any institution—eighteen objects, ranging from body prints to tarp paintings. The curator Rob Storr put him in a group show there in 1991, and acquired a basketball-net piece for the museum. Several other works were purchased, including "The Holy Bible: Old Testament," but more than a third of the total was donated by A. C. Hudgins, who joined the museum's board of trustees in 2012. Hammons has never had a solo show at MOMA, although several curators have offered to give him one. In 2017, when the museum acquired "Black Pope (Sandwich Board Man)," by Charles White, Hammons's mentor, Christophe Cherix, the curator of drawings, asked Hammons for advice on how to present it. A somewhat mysterious image of a heavily robed man wearing an ecclesiastical headdress, "Black Pope" was one of White's greatest works, Hammons told him, and the only way to do it justice was to pair it with a drawing by Leonardo da Vinci. Complex negotiations with the Royal Collection, in London, ensued, aided by Glenn Lowry, MOMA's director, and the Tate Gallery's Nicholas Serota, and from October 17, 2017, to January 3, 2018, "Black Pope" and a brush-and-ink drawing by Leonardo, identified as "The drapery of a kneeling figure," were on view in a two-artist exhibition at the museum.

Hammons's ability to make lords of the art world turn somersaults for him is based on the avalanche of money that transformed the art market in the two-thousands, making a few contemporary artists more expensive than Post-Impressionists and more powerful than museum directors. Hammons, keenly aware that pricing affects the way we look at art, was out to prove that work by a black artist could command as much as work by Jeff Koons, Gerhard Richter,

and other contemporary-market stars. By making financial manipulation a part of his process, he has become one of the most expensive artists living. (A dazzling "basketball chandelier," from 2000, with a cut-crystal net and a backboard flanked by twin candelabra, brought eight million dollars at auction in 2013, and would almost certainly be worth three or four times that today.) To show Hammons's work, a dealer has to buy it first, at prices set by Hammons. According to Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn, a dealer who has bought and sold works by Hammons for many years, "You have to understand that it may be a fantasy price, and you have to believe in the fantasy."



In 2007, Hammons surprised the art world by having a show at the L & M gallery, on the Upper East Side. He conceived and installed it with no help from the gallery. "We took the risk of giving him *carte blanche*," said Dominique Lévy, the gallery's co-owner, who had been buying work from Hammons for years and was "fascinated by him, by the poetry and by the anger." Lévy said that she and her partner, Robert Mnuchin (whose son is Donald Trump's Secretary of the Treasury), had no clue of what was going to be in the show. Hammons brought the work in a small truck: six very expensive fur coats, all of which he had stained, seared with a blowtorch, or smeared with paint. The idea, a comment on luxury and its relation to art, had come from Hasegawa, who was listed on the show's announcement as co-artist. Just before the opening, Hammons asked Lévy to walk down Madison Avenue wearing one of the coats, a chinchilla, while he filmed her. "The whole thing was very theatrical, a sort of sculptural-conceptual performance," Lévy said. "David insisted that there could be no sales talk in the gallery, no press release, and no catalogue until a year later." The gallery had to buy the coats in advance, for an undisclosed sum, which, we can assume, was steeped in fantasy and belief.

Hammons refused to participate in a survey show of his work over the decades, which Mnuchin put together (without Lévy) in 2016. It included body

prints, hair pieces, the Whitney Museum's 1992 "Untitled," a paint-slathered fur coat, an earlier version of his "basketball chandelier," and many other works borrowed from public and private sources. Hammons did not attend the opening. Just before it, though, he came by and made changes—removing some pieces and adding others.

Ben Okri, a Nigerian-born poet and novelist who lives in London, learned, in 2014, that David Hammons wanted to meet him. Hammons had been deeply impressed by a collection of Okri's essays called "A Time for New Dreams." (In a Japanese restaurant last winter, Hammons wrote the book's title on the paper that his chopsticks came in, handed it to me, and said, "I want you to read this.") "David kept asking the White Cube gallery"—where Hammons had just had a show in London—"to connect us," Okri told me. "And eventually they sent me to New York so we could have a conversation—a weeklong conversation." On his arrival at J.F.K., Okri was heading for the taxi stand when he noticed "a rather strange-looking man in an unusual hat," who seemed to be following him. "I said, 'David?' He nodded and said, 'It's nice to be greeted at the airport, isn't it?' We walked to his car, and I got borne into Hammonsland."

In the week that followed, they took long walks in Harlem, the East Village, the Bronx, and other parts of the city, and they talked "as though we'd known one another for a long time," Okri said. "David knew the houses where the great jazz musicians lived. To walk with David is a lesson in seeing, and not just ordinary seeing. He's a supernatural noticer. He'd draw my attention to people working and the materials they used, and to trash and discarded things, and the relationships between them. You realize how little you see. David didn't like the look of the hotel they'd booked me into, so he pulled me out and took me somewhere else, much nicer. You see the care that people put into their work, but it's quite rare to find that same care in their dealings with others. I've had all kinds of extraordinary experiences in my life, but this one is kind of up there. I came back to England a different person."

"And did I mention how funny David is?" Okri added, in an e-mail. "In his work humor complicates the levels of meaning. If you look closely at pictures of him after a certain age, you will see a hidden smile."

A major Hammons retrospective, by far the largest exhibition he has ever had, opened, in May, at the international mega-gallery Hauser & Wirth's lavish new space in Los Angeles. For a decade or more, he'd had standing invitations from most of the important museums in the U.S. and abroad to show whatever and whenever he wanted, and he had made it clear that he wasn't interested. "As an artist I am not aligned with the collectors or the dealers or the museums; I see them all as frauds," he had said in a 1990 interview. So why, in his mid-seventies, did he deliver the prize to Hauser & Wirth? There was talk that the owners had paid him a huge amount up front—forty or fifty million dollars. Marc Payot, the firm's New York-based partner, scoffed at this. "The rule was that we had to buy a couple of his works—not for fifty, not for forty, not for twenty," he told me. "But we don't comment on these things." What the gallery also gave Hammons was what he had demanded from Lévy and Mnuchin: complete control. "Whatever I asked for, the answer was yes," Hammons told Stacen Berg, who runs the Los Angeles gallery.

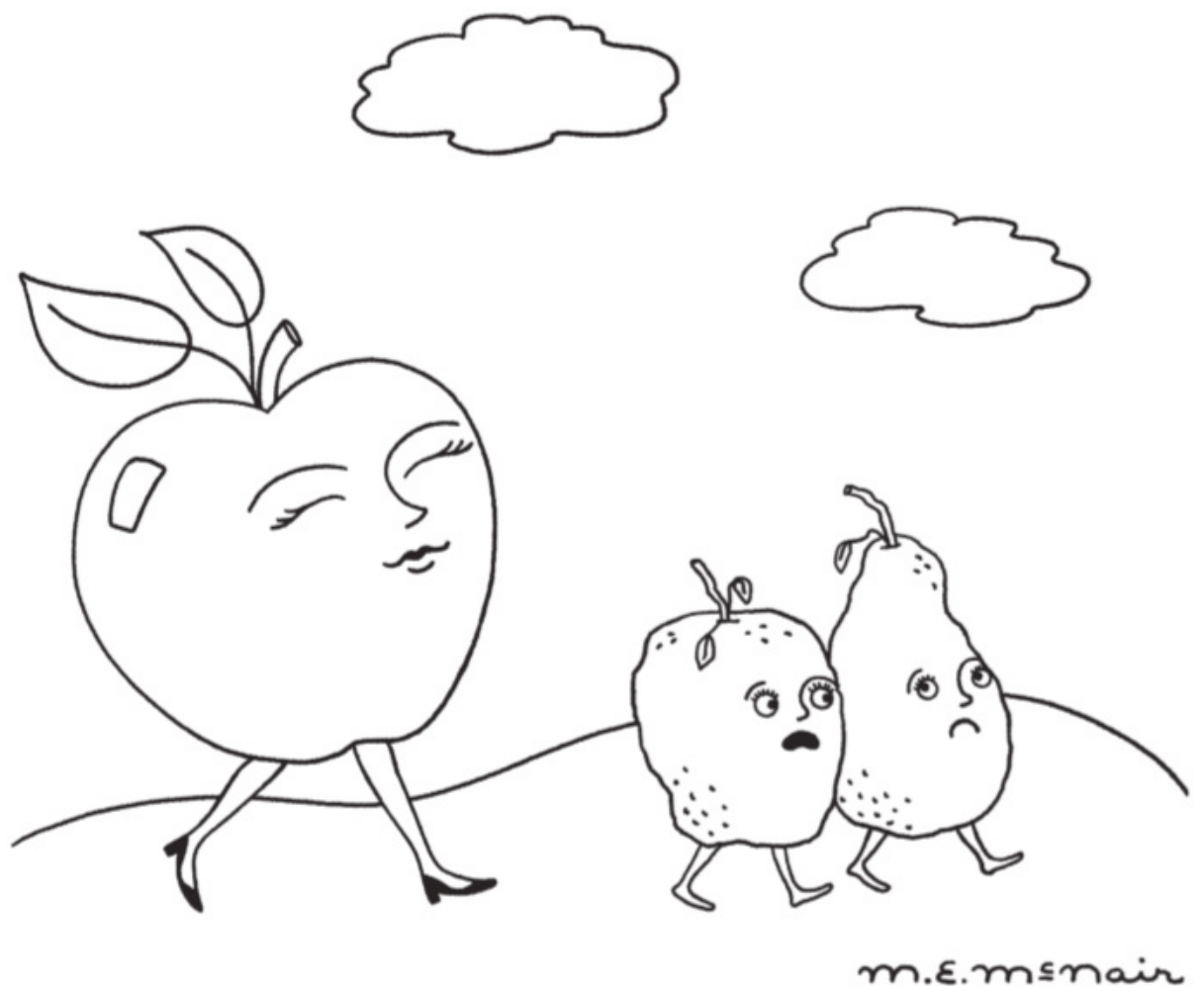
Manuela and Iwan Wirth had been wooing Hammons for fifteen years. Like almost everyone in the art world, they had been captivated, in 2002, by "Concerto in Black and Blue," his first New York exhibition since the 1990 PS1 retrospective, a conceptual labyrinth where viewers were given tiny, key-chain flashlights to navigate the empty, pitch-dark rooms of the downtown Ace Gallery. That show, to me, was quintessential Hammons—an evanescent but indelible experience, made out of nothing, with nothing for sale. Hauser & Wirth had done a show with Hammons in 2004, at its Zurich gallery. "We went many times to his studio after that, and six years ago I started discussions with Lois Plehn," Payot told me. When the gallery, which has showrooms in Zurich, New York, London, and Hong Kong, opened its Los Angeles space, in

2016, Hammons was interested. "Los Angeles was an important part of my life," he told Payot. Because the gallery was letting Hammons decide what would be in the show and how the works would be presented, Payot was in the dark until two weeks before the opening. Crates from Hammons's studio had been arriving for a month or so, but Hammons was going to install the exhibition, and, as Payot said, "He could have decided to show just three pieces." In fact, he used almost everything he had shipped—nearly a hundred objects or groups of objects, a few of them made for the exhibition, and all of them (with three exceptions) owned by Hammons.

The first thing viewers saw was a cluster of thirty or forty pop-up tents crowded together in the gallery's outdoor plaza, many of them stencilled with the phrase "This could be u." They were the same kind of tents that had taken over the sidewalks on Skid Row, four blocks away, and in other sections of L.A., stark evidence of the city's growing homeless population. (Hammons requested that his tents go to a homeless shelter when the show closed.) The message here—that privilege and poverty were close relations—carried over into the first galleries of the show, where

paintings in various sizes (some very large) were hidden from view by worn and dingy tarps, blankets, sheets of metal or plywood, and other opaque materials. Small rips or holes in the coverings gave tantalizing glimpses of lyrical abstractions underneath. When Hammons's tarp paintings first appeared, at L & M, in 2011, they had struck me as a return to the anger and violence of his body prints and spade pieces—the artist throwing beauty our way but not letting us see it. That was overly simplistic. Beauty and ugliness cohabit in these works, enhancing and negating each other, forcing us to confront the beauty in ugliness, and vice versa. "With David you can be sure it's not just about the appearance of the thing," the artist Kerry James Marshall said to me. "He's incredibly disciplined, and there's a level of poetry in the work that other people don't seem to get to."

Desecrated fur coats were in another gallery, and, farther on, an antique armoire lay on its back, mirrored front facing up. The exhibition filled two buildings. There was a room with ten vintage household scales, each one holding (weighing) a stack of art books interspersed with paperback nonfiction. In another space, three empty Plexiglas



"She's genetically modified, you know."

boxes rested on pedestals that stood on the feet of African sculptures—the kind you can buy on the sidewalk outside museums. (The title, written on the wall, was “UNDERSTAND.”) There were drawings that looked like misty Chinese landscapes, made by Hammons bouncing a street-soiled basketball on sheets of paper. There was a Navajo rug, and a cactus plant, and a red plastic ball that filled a medium-sized gallery from floor to ceiling—post-Duchampian readymades, chosen and sometimes altered by the artist. There were many photographs, and paintings made with Kool-Aid powder, and paintings or drawings by artists Hammons admires, including Willem de Kooning, Agnes Martin, and Jack Whitten (on loan from Hauser & Wirth, and thus the only works in the show that he didn’t own), along with paintings he does own by Ed Clark and Miles Davis. Except for “UNDERSTAND,” the non-Hammons works were the only ones with labels, pencilled on the wall by Hauser & Wirth’s registrar, who also inscribed some droll comments by Hammons (“It’s Been Done Before”; “This reminds me of”). In a corridor between two galleries, there was a carved-wood font holding a pool of water, and, just to the right of it, a printout of a 2003 e-mail, in which the writer declines to purchase one of the 1983 snowballs that Hammons is said to have frozen and preserved. Stacen Berg smiled when I asked her if we were to think that the holy water here was a melted snowball. “I’m happy to keep the myth alive,” she said.

Berg told me that she was “terrified” when she met Hammons last February. “He was seeing the space for the first time, and we were all holding our breath.” For a man who shields his private life so implacably, Hammons can be surprisingly open and winning. His gentle, courtly, and often playful manner quickly put Berg’s anxieties to rest. When he took his hat off for a moment, she saw that his hair was dyed pink. “He sat on a bench in the gallery’s garden for hours one afternoon, watching people walk by,” she recalled. “When I asked what he was doing, he said, ‘I want to know what kind of medicine they need.’” Soon after that, Hammons told Payot that the gallery shop, which sold ceramics, jewelry, and other

craftwork, was “a problem.” What was needed in that space was a “healer.” Berg interviewed several spiritual healers—they’re not hard to find in L.A., apparently—and brought in a psychic worker to “cleanse” the gallery.

Hammons dedicated his Los Angeles exhibition to Ornette Coleman, the revolutionary jazz musician and composer, whom he described to me as “the Duchamp of music, the one who changed everything.” A room at the entrance was a Coleman showcase, with record covers and posters and stills from Shirley Clarke’s 1985 film about him, and samples of a limited-edition LP recording that viewers could buy, with the proceeds going to Coleman’s family. Hammons never met Coleman—or Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Charlie Parker, Thelonious Monk, or any of the other jazz greats whose music he reveres. “I didn’t want to know the artist, just the music,” he told me, when I sat next to him at a small dinner given by Hauser & Wirth on the night before the Los Angeles show opened. He asked me if I knew that Miles Davis had white musicians in his band “because he didn’t want the music to be too black.” That reminded me of something Hammons had said, years earlier, to Kellie Jones: “I hate the system, every black man does, but too much work about racism is redundant. You’ve got to take your anger and make it beautiful, like Dr. J going to the hoop or like Duke Ellington.”

The dinner was in a private room at the gallery’s restaurant. Hammons



had indicated that he was too tired to attend—he had worked all day on the installation—but he changed his mind. The conversation was boisterous and sometimes loud, but Hammons, who never raises his voice, had no trouble making himself heard. He told several jokes: “What did zero say to eight? Nice waist.” “Who paid for the Last

Supper? We did, and we’re still paying.” Afterward, as we were leaving, I said I’d like to sit down and talk with him at some point. “Yes,” he said. “Come to my studio in the autumn.” Autumn was four months away. Lois Plehn warned that he might decide against it, but in late August she called to say that the meeting was on—my wife and I could have an hour with him if we went to his studio in Yonkers at noon on the following Wednesday.

We arrived early, and drove around the city, eleven miles north of Manhattan, until noon. Hammons, who owns properties in Harlem and in upstate New York, bought the Yonkers building five years ago—a former warehouse in an old, run-down part of town. After four years of extensive renovations, it is now his main base. A young man in a floppy hat opened the door for us. He shouted “Mr. D.,” and a moment later Hammons appeared at the end of a long hall. He was wearing a loose white overshirt, and white pants that stopped two or three inches short of his ankles, and the inevitable felt hat, round and short-brimmed. He offered us water, and went off to get it—gesturing for us to sit on a low, beautifully contoured wooden bench that looked ancient and Japanese. The renovated, twenty-nine-thousand-square-foot warehouse resembles a Chelsea art gallery, with its polished concrete floors and twenty-foot-high walls. I had heard that he planned to have shows here, of his own work and also work by artists he admires, but right now it feels like a sanctuary, light-years away from the art world.

When he returned from the kitchen, my wife, Dodie, asked if it would be O.K. to use a recorder. “I think if you left it off you’ll remember the things that you need to remember,” he said, quietly. Sitting on the low bench was awkward. I began by asking how “Day’s End” had come about, and he held up his hand. “Wait,” he said. “We have to talk about something first. I’ve only done one interview, about thirty years ago. When someone wants to interview me, I feel like it’s an interrogation, not a conversation. That comes from being stopped by the police so many times, for, you know, ‘What are

you doing in this neighborhood? Do you have an I.D.? Is that bicycle yours?' When people want to talk with me about art, it's another kind of interrogation, the question-and-answer thing. I don't see it that way. I follow the spirit that tells me when to say something and what to say." He was speaking very slowly, with visible emotion. "I've been practicing this, how to handle this interview," he said. "Lois told me, 'You can do it.' But I don't trust the word. I trust the eye. And I just can't talk about how things came about, because it's so personal—it's almost like raping me to talk about it." Hammons, I realized, was close to tears. Dodie said, "We don't have to talk about that, or about anything. It's wonderful just to be here."

Clearly relieved, Hammons stood up, and opened a door to a very long room, with a few of his tarp paintings and other works on the walls. I felt as though we had passed a test of some kind. He ushered us into the room, and said, "This is turning out better than I thought it would." We paused to look at a small object on a stand, an open-fronted box holding a single, delicate wire that was attached to the box at one end and held in place at the other by an invisible magnet. "My wife did it," Hammons said. "I asked her for a birthday present, and she gave me this. Her studio is behind that wall, but I'm not allowed to go there."

We sat around a small table, and because our conversation was random, and unrecorded, and at times a bit arcane, the parts I remember may not be the ones that needed remembering. Hammons noticed that Dodie was wearing mismatched shoes—the same model, but one black and the other blue. He was delighted. "That tells me everything about you," he said. And to me, "Your wife is a rascal. I saw them shoes, and I said this is a rascal, alive and well." Hammons's playful side had taken over. "We are not going to talk about Duchamp," he announced, gleefully. When I asked about his third-eye glasses (which he was wearing), he said, "That's interrogation," and we all laughed. Donald Trump pushed his way in. Hammons blamed the Trump catastrophe on President Obama, "because of the backlash." But now, at least, "we have the truth. Yes, yes, Trump is the truth about Amer-



"We've met."

• •

ica, because America has been like this forever. White people haven't seen it before, but we have. You know, the reason we never see aliens is that everyone in the galaxy knows this planet is a bad planet. They all know to stay away. I used to have a girlfriend who was a dancer. Dancers are always in pain, and she told me the thing to do was relax into the pain. That's a good metaphor for the time we're living in."

In a tenor whisper, Hammons sang some words from a Joni Mitchell song: "I've looked at life from both sides now." He made a telephone call to the artist Senga Nengudi, whose Los Angeles studio he used to crash in during his poverty years—we had told him we'd been unable to reach her. The recorded message was Nengudi singing, "La-la-la, la-la-la-la-la-a-a . . ." Hammons hung up and said, "Now you've talked with Senga." When Dodie commented on his unwrinkled, youthful-looking hands, he held up a finger and said, "Black don't crack."

Some of what he told us strained credibility. The thirty-years-ago interview, which must have been the one with Kellie Jones in 1986, was not the only time he has answered questions. He also did so with Elena Filipovic

(after she'd talked to forty-four people about him), and there are several published Q. & A.s with other people. What surprised me was that, at the age of seventy-six, he was still nourishing the Hammons myth—making himself appear more reclusive and otherworldly than he is. "There is something magnificent and powerful about David," Arthur Jafa had told me. "It's his ability to retain his equilibrium in the face of being the first crab out of the barrel. Not the first—Jean-Michel Basquiat was able to integrate the mainstream art world. He was in the game. But Basquiat didn't survive. David survived. He's the one who came through."

The strongest impression I took from our Yonkers meeting was that Hammons thoroughly enjoys being an enchanter, and that he will continue to elude us all. The Hammons myth is impervious. It may be his most enduring art work—an ongoing one, which he can alter and shape and use as he sees fit. By the time we left the studio, having overstayed our appointed hour (at his insistence) by twenty minutes, a lot of warmth had come into the conversation. He walked us outside, gave Dodie a hug, and said to us, "I'm very glad you've accepted my way of seeing things." ♦



Old Hope
Clare Sestanovich

EN

When I was about halfway between twenty and thirty, I lived in a large, run-down house that other people thought was romantic. There was a claw-foot tub with squeaky knobs, and philodendrons that draped over the bannisters. The door to my bedroom was at least twelve feet tall. I installed a coatrack over the top, and whenever I needed to retrieve a jacket, or a towel, I stood on my desk chair, swivelling uncertainly.

There were six of us in the house. We were all about the same age, and at some point during the summer—I had moved in at the beginning of March, when the mornings were still cold, veins of ice glittering over the front steps—this became claustrophobic, unbearable. The house smelled of sweat and bike tires and something at the back of the oven being charred over and over again. Two boys lived on the top floor and another lived in the basement. (They weren't men, not really.) I was aware of being surrounded. Shirtless, they cooked big vats of tomato sauce, the steam beading on their faces and clinging to the fur in their armpits. They smoked bongos they didn't clean, and returned my books warped by bathwater.

One afternoon, while a desk fan whirled near my cheek, I composed a long e-mail to my high-school English teacher, because I remembered him as handsome in a remote way. The school had been large and impersonal, full of unkind sounds: the clang of lockers and the terrible screaming bell. But the English teacher wore expensive clothes and took an understated pleasure in saying inspiring things. In my head, he belonged at a prep school. My idea of prep schools came from outdated novels. "A Separate Peace," that sort of thing. Later, at college, I learned that going to these schools entailed a lot of lacrosse and furtive blow jobs, and that, too, became a kind of romance in my head.

I calculated that the English teacher was about forty, and then I pressed Send. The e-mail covered a lot of ground. I summarized what I called "my college experience" and devoted a long paragraph to "The Artist's Way," the self-help book that I was using to structure my days. I described the cat outside my window, which I took the liberty of calling a feral cat. Toward the end of the

e-mail, I found myself saying that I couldn't understand the fear of death. Maybe it was a boy thing. The male ego. If death turned out to be anything other than pure oblivion—if the afterlife was even remotely lucid—I would be disappointed. Wasn't everyone looking forward to the chance to actually, finally rest?

One evening, at a Chinese restaurant with my friend Max, I debated whether to tell him about the e-mail. All the tables were occupied, so we sat on the sidewalk out front, eating from plastic containers. One of the tables inside was pushed right up against the window, and occasionally I made eye contact with the woman sitting there, only inches away. Her boyfriend leaned his head against the glass, his curly hair flattening like something compressed in a microscope slide.

I put an entire dumpling in my mouth, and wondered if Max would think the e-mail was *in character*. I had been asking myself this sort of thing more often. I knew I should permit myself uncharacteristic actions, but when I did act—and in general, I thought about acting more than I acted—I wanted to know if I was acting like me.

"Or the person recognizable as me," I said out loud.

"What?"

"Never mind."

Max bit a small hole in one end of a dumpling and dribbled soy sauce into the opening.

"Hannah says she's at the point where she would consider getting pregnant to be a sign."

Hannah and Max had been dating for a year or so. She was an avid reader, with relatively few opinions about the things she read.

"A sign of what?" I said. "That it's meant to be?"

"Or just, that it's time."

I imagined Hannah in maternity clothes. She was small enough that the billowy tunics would make her look even smaller.

"She isn't actively pursuing motherhood, but it's a future she knows she wants," Max said. "So why not now?"

"Motherhood is a pursuit?"

The dumpling slipped between his chopsticks. Ambition alarmed Max. For

years, he had been saying he was going to find a new job.

"I only like thinking about the future because it hasn't happened," he said.

I nodded while I finished chewing. "Happening spoils the fun."

It's difficult to say whether I expected the English teacher to respond. For as long as I can remember, I have known the phrase *Don't get your hopes up*. My mother said it habitually, about even the smallest form of desire. The faintest glimmer of wishful thinking. She said it when I wondered if the roadside diner offered free refills, or if my father would send me a Christmas present. She said it when I applied to every college I had seen mentioned in books—the ones with demure colors, Latin mottoes, things called quads.

There were graver threats she might have worried about. Student debt and callous boys. Rising sea levels. But it was disappointment, most of all, that she feared for me. For a long time, her fear seemed like a form of doubt, maybe even an insult. Proof that she didn't think I could weather the minor calamities that life had in store. I would have preferred, I thought, that she imagine me as a tragic victim—someone susceptible to plane crashes and sexual harassment. But she didn't worry that I would die or be destroyed. She worried that I would crumple in the face of everyday failures, that I would gradually deflate—a quiet, unremarkable hissing—into a case of unfulfilled potential.

And so while I waited for a response to my e-mail the worst-case scenario I imagined was a standard reply. *Hope this finds you well*. No reply at all would be better than that.

When the English teacher wrote back, I was distracted. The college I had attended was in the news. A nineteen-year-old boy had died at one of the fraternities.

The stories about the tragedy had a unifying effect among those of us who were not directly involved. I began e-mailing with friends I had lost touch with. Their lives were hard for me to imagine. They had good salaries and reliable boyfriends, with whom they bought reasonably sized pets. They circulated Facebook petitions for uncontroversial causes—cancer walks and suicide hotlines and

hurricane relief. I disdained them, and was aware that my disdain was born of dislike for what these friends proved about me: that whatever I was doing—cultivating a taste for chipped mirrors and monochrome palettes, reading self-help books that scorned other self-help books—was a life of ugly indecision, pooling like day-old rainwater.

In our e-mails, we asked the same questions too many times: What did we know back then? What should we have known?

When the English teacher's reply came, it wasn't any of the things I'd feared it might be. He wrote without preamble. He taught at a new school in a new city. It was a Quaker school, which was apparent in only small ways. There was no dress code and no student government. Lofty words, called tenets, were painted on the walls in big block letters. *Equality. Simplicity. Environmental Stewardship.*

Once a week, the school convened for Meeting. Like chapel, except everyone sat in silence. The chairs were arranged in concentric circles, with an empty space in the center. There was no preacher, no text, no assigned seating. Most of the students were Jewish. Anyone was allowed to speak, but sometimes the Meeting passed in uninterrupted silence. *If you're moved to share* was what the real Quakers said. The implication, presumably, was that God did the moving. But the students interpreted these instructions loosely. The results were beautiful, often breathtaking.

They spoke about all kinds of things. One spoke about his grandfather, who was dying in a different country, and another wanted to talk about his baseball team—its first time in the playoffs. A third explained that he was making a list of all the ways to categorize people. Crest or Colgate, Apple or Android. People who joke about farts and people who don't. People who say "I love you" at the end of every phone call and people who can barely bring themselves to say it at all.

If there were only adults in the room, the English teacher said, all this vulnerability would be a performance. The art of carefully calibrated disclosure.

Then the e-mail ended, as abruptly as it had begun. He did not include a sign-off, which was the kind of thing I

thought about a lot. *Best* or *All best* or *All my best*. He just wrote the first initial of his first name, a name I had never called him.

I resolved to seek advice about the English teacher's e-mail, but, as time passed and it remained in my in-box, crowded with other, more straightforward messages, the strangeness of it came to feel like a kind of intimacy. I was afraid of what discussing the intimacy might do to it.

Max texted that he was coming over: he needed help.

Instantly, I relaxed. I would have to make the e-mail small and insignificant to accommodate his problems. This task made me energetic, like a sudden burst of resolve to clean utensils that have sat in the sink, their dirtiness turning into rebuke.

Max perched on my bed and untied his shoes slowly. He arranged the shoes under the bed. His fastidiousness seemed ominous, so I asked him if Hannah was pregnant.

"Of course not," he said. "She takes the pill."

I nodded. "She's conscientious."

"She doesn't even set an alarm to remember," he said admiringly. "She just does."

Max was very handsome. To those who doubted that my feelings for Max were uncomplicated and platonic, I often added: *objectively* handsome. But when he spoke in tones of awe he seemed ugly.

"Well, she said if she *did* get pregnant."

"That conversation stood for a larger conversation." He sounded impatient. "It wasn't, like, practical."

We sat there quietly for a little while. In general, I prided myself on understanding the true meaning of things. I looked at Max's sneakers, their laces coiled neatly out of view.

"What's the real problem, then?" I said, when I had recovered.

The problem was that Max couldn't stop imagining Hannah having sex with strangers. Or not-strangers. Men or women. Anyone, really, who wasn't him. It had got to the point, he said, that he had to conduct these fantasies during sex in order to stay turned on.

"Do you close your eyes?" I said.

Max shook his head.

"I don't imagine *she's* someone else."

He swung his feet back and forth, the way a child might. "I just imagine *I'm* someone else."

"It sounds exciting," I admitted.

He looked at me gratefully. When he leaned back on the bed, his shirt rose up, revealing the gentle incline of his stomach. I might have touched it, if it weren't so difficult to convey the difference between tenderness and desire.

"Did you ever have imaginary friends?"

"Of course," he said. "An old man named Leo. And an orphan whose name was all vowels."

"I had an orphan, too!"

"And sometimes the ghost of Leo's wife."

I had photos of Max as a little kid. Bowl cuts and big cheeks. The same eyes. It was easy to love the little kid. Max looked at the ceiling, where the remnants of a glow-in-the-dark solar system clustered around the overhead light.

"I yearn for my childhood," I said. "But everyone says I seem old."

"That's because children don't yearn," Max said. "They just want." The adhesive on the stars was slowly coming off. A comet's tail wilted, Saturn's rings peeled at the edges. "They want *stuff*. Popsicles. Yogurt in tubes."

"Is the fantasy with Hannah—"

"For Hannah."

I squinted, which I hoped conveyed skepticism. "Is that yearning?"

Max shrugged. He stood up carefully, the mattress sinking and shifting under his feet. Wobbling, he reached up toward the stickers, but the ceiling was still far away. His T-shirt rose even higher when he lifted his arm. The comet tail dangled out of reach. Like everyone, he looked strange from below.

"Yearning is so religious," Max said, bouncing gently on his heels.

"It is not."

When I thought of all the ways faces rearranged themselves from different angles and distances—a nose in profile, a nose up close, a nose illuminated by a camera's flash—it seemed miraculous that we recognized each other at all.

"Fine," he said. "It's so *spiritual*."

"Don't say it like that."

When Max sat back down, the bed-springs whined.

"If I say I'm looking for a way to make Hannah an object of my desire again." He stopped swinging his feet.

AMERICAN SONNET FOR MY PAST AND FUTURE ASSASSIN

Side effects include dry spells, dry coughs, dry eyes & crying,
Photosensitivity, blurred vision, trouble sleeping, trouble with gravity,
Cold feet, weight gain, weight loss, hair loss, blood lust & blood loss,
Memory loss, loss of appetite, bellyaches, headaches, heartaches,
Backaches, bruises, blueness, redness, whiteness, discoloration,
Itching, wrinkling, slouching, lying, backbiting, a taste for metal,
A taste for meddling & mixed messaging, a taste for witches'
Brews brewed by the motherfuckers who slew all the witches.
Side effects include blockages & blockades, a block-Head-of-State-
Your-business-as-usual, a block-head-strong-arm-of-the-law,
A block-head-shot-gun-point-and-shoot, down-fall-out shelters.
Side effects include nausea, dizziness, numbness, dumbness,
Dementias, deletions, leeches, latches, hexes, hoaxes, hocus-pocuses,
And, if there is justice, spiritual, moral, federal, state, & local charges.

—Terrance Hayes

"Does that mean you're objectifying her?"

"I want to be a good guy."

We sat there silently for a while, not looking at each other, which could have meant that Max wasn't a good person, or that no one was, or that we wanted to sound smart and goodness was the kind of thing that always came out sounding dumb.

Sometimes in the morning there was a star or an orb or a planet's ring on the pillow beside me. I had to remind myself not to make everything into a metaphor.

I wrote the English teacher again on a Monday. I told him that the fraternity had me thinking about things that travel in packs. Big cats and protesters and cans of soda. The visual element interested me. Seeing these things on their own became sad, sometimes even alarming. Lone-wolf shooters. A table for one. A single can of beer in a paper bag.

High school is the ideal time for packs, I wrote. Everyone is weak, everyone wants strength in numbers. Once a critical mass has assembled, of course, the vying begins. Jostling your way to the front.

What counts, I asked him, as being alone? In the mornings, I could hear the whir of someone's electric toothbrush through the wall. On the subway, I misjudged the space between two passengers, pressing myself against the shape and warmth of unfamiliar thighs. And

who was that man I saw every week—sometimes every day—on the same platform, waiting for the same train? I noticed when he wore a new red coat, but I never knew his name.

Every few weeks, I saw Hannah jogging in loops around the park. I went to the park to walk or read or call my mom on the phone, but, if I saw Hannah, I felt aimless and guilty. I made myself do a dozen pushups, or the kind of sit-ups where you pedal your feet in the air.

One weekend, I stopped and sat under a tree beside the running path, and then I saw Hannah twice. On the first loop, she didn't say anything—just waved and went on running. On the second loop, she slowed down as she approached, and jogged in place for a little while. Her face was blotchy with exertion, but she wasn't sweating very much. This made her seem pretty—full of restraint. She had taken her headphones off when she got close, and I could hear a pop song leaking out of them.

"Hey," she said.

"Hey."

She didn't turn the music off, and I could hear the song building toward its last ecstatic chorus. They were lyrics I knew without knowing how. She spoke over the tinny, faraway music. We didn't say anything interesting. How many loops she'd done, what I was reading, whether the cool weather was here to stay. She

put the headphones back on before saying, "Are you sleeping with Max?"

Her face had almost returned to its normal color.

"Of course not."

She stood there a few moments longer, bobbing her head to the music, or just to her thoughts, and then she was running again. I sat under the tree, waiting for her third loop, but she didn't reappear. I saw a dog walker, a cycling team, a group of toddlers all holding the same rope. The song got stuck in my head.

The last time I saw the English teacher, we were sitting in his office, in between the chemistry lab and the girls' bathroom. As is true of life, but not movies: I didn't know it was the last time.

That year, my handwriting had transformed abruptly. Until then, I wrote in vigilant cursive. "M"s with three humps, "G"s that didn't look anything like "G"s. These inefficiencies seemed elegant, until suddenly they seemed absurd. In my cautious world, this counted as a revelation. Afterward, I didn't write so much as scrawl. I was known, by then, as an overly conscientious student, and most of the teachers ignored the illegibility of my new handwriting. One of them, leafing through the pages of an assignment, said, "I can assume you're saying something correct in here, right?"

The English teacher, of course, was different. He called me into his office that day and said he couldn't read a single word of my final exam. He held out the small stack of blue books. The class was about tragedies. We were always saying things like "But is it *tragic*, or just *sad*?" "Here," he said, flapping the books in the air. "Read them to me."

I read the essays haltingly at first, since the words seemed to accost me: they had never been intended to be said aloud. I paused after a few paragraphs. I would have chosen differently, I said, if I'd known I was going to perform. The English teacher didn't respond, and so eventually I continued. He watched me carefully. Didn't smile a fake smile or nod encouragingly. Already I was imagining how I would describe this—in writing, maybe, or to a friend who didn't actually exist. *Our eyes locked*. I pictured solid, clinking metal.

I began to read with more confidence,

changing words here and there when I saw a sentence headed toward a clumsy conclusion. These adjustments made me feel artful—adult. When I finished, I was out of breath, my face prickly with adrenaline. I waited a few seconds before I looked up, allowing myself the thrill of being watched. The words on the page were a faded graphite streak; they were or weren't the same words I had spoken out loud.

When I did look up, he was unbending a paper clip in his lap. I couldn't see his face. The part in his hair was a straight pink line.

"Ow."

He dropped the paper clip on the ground. His finger, reflexively, went between his lips. He met my gaze then, but he seemed distracted.

"So," he said. "What grade should I give you?"

There was no longer anything pleasurable about his inscrutable expression. His mouth twitched or his eyes flickered. Or maybe I just imagined that he was moving farther and farther out of reach.

"I don't know," I said, looking at the floor, the mangled paper clip on the carpet, gray on gray.

"What do you deserve?"

He twirled a pencil around his thumb and his pointer finger. It was a habit the boys in class all copied. Boys who slouched and argued, boys who took their sneakers off under their desks.

"Nothing much."

"Nothing much," he repeated, turning over the phrase, as if it were extremely interesting, or unbelievably stupid. "B-plus? B-minus?"

I said nothing.

"C-plus?"

I was an A student.

"O.K.," I said. I held out the books, which weighed almost nothing. "Do you need these back?"

He shrugged. On my way out, I threw them in the trash.

A few weeks later, I graduated, wearing a robe in primary blue. The teachers wore blouses and ties and uncharacteristically nice shoes. I never found the English teacher in the crowd, though I remember waiting for him—and telling myself I wasn't waiting—until nearly everyone had left. I watched the football field gradually emerge

from under so many feet. Clumps of kicked-up dirt, the puncture wounds of high heels.

There was a garden behind my house, but it was mostly plants that flourished of their own accord: wisteria and honeysuckle, clover and scorpion grass. For a few weeks each year, a blanket of crocuses. "Technically," I told Max, "they're weeds."

I wanted to plant something new—something intentional—so we bought paper envelopes full of seeds. The man who sold them to us said they'd never grow. Already, the weather was changing. Max nibbled the bottom of a honeysuckle and sucked.

"The problem with horticulture," I said, "is the more you know, the more things you're obliged to dislike."

We pressed the seeds into the soil and covered them up. They were small and easy to misplace. Some blew away in the wind. I planted tomatoes, because I wanted to see something ripen on the vine.

We sat on the ground, and Max plucked onion grass absent-mindedly.

"Do you know about peppers?" he said.

"What about them?"

He took off his shirt and wiped his hands on his stomach. He was wet and shiny, and the grass from his palms clung to his skin.

"Green peppers and yellow peppers and red peppers."

I took off my shirt, too, and then my bra.

"Yeah, I know," I said. "They're all the same thing."

Max looked at me carefully. There were a few hairs around my nipples, long and dark, like eyelashes in the wrong place. We were sitting cross-legged, and he reached out and held one of my breasts in his hand. I imagined him putting his mouth around it, and the image was so vivid that it seemed to me I could taste my own sweat. Then Max let go. He wiped his hands again, and I couldn't help thinking that it was me he was wiping off.

The English teacher wrote me one more e-mail, at the very end of the summer. It arrived in the middle of the day, but I was still in bed. I liked the idea of going all day without speaking, clearing my throat sometime in the evening,

preparing to address someone for the first time. I had folded a blanket into a person-size rectangle—just enough weight to feel like I was being pinned down. I drifted in and out of sleep and dreamed about boring things. Brushing my teeth, trying to wash the cheese grater and shredding the sponge. When I woke up, I was impatient, and a little embarrassed. I wanted to scold someone: this isn't what dreaming is for!

While I lay there, one of the boys who lived in the attic was moving out. I could guess what he was carrying by the sound of his footsteps. He ran up the stairs three or four at a time (trash bags, mop), and came down slowly, step by step (bed frames, picture frames). The new roommate was arriving soon. I'd never met him, but I'd scrolled through enough of his social media to decide I didn't object, and wasn't curious.

I looked at the e-mail for a long time without opening it. The blanket didn't cover my feet, which made me very aware of my toes.

Lying under the blanket, sweating in all the creases of my body, I told myself that the English teacher had been cruel all along. In the hallway, plastic hangers clattered. A pillow thrown from two floors up sounded like getting the wind knocked out of you.

Cruel! I repeated the word in my head, trying to approximate indignation. What does outrage look like, when it first begins to unfurl? The doorbell rang. The old roommate greeted the new roommate. A few minutes later, they knocked on my door.

"It's us."

I pushed the blanket away and underneath my clothes were damp. I pictured Max rolling off Hannah when they were finished having sex. Both of them on their backs, staring into space. In a second, she would pull up the sheet and one of them would turn toward the other, murmuring the usual things, touching with hands that were just hands again.

"Come in," I said, forgetting to clear my throat.

The door opened and I deleted the English teacher's e-mail. I felt loss and then relief, or relief and then loss. I sat up. A star did not fall from the ceiling. ♦



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THE CRITICS



BOOKS

SLOW BURN

The letters of Ralph Ellison.

BY KEVIN YOUNG

There is a literature dedicated to fire—think of Dante, or Dylan Thomas’s “Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London”—and there is a literature consumed by fire quite literally. A seller of rare books I know once issued an entire catalogue devoted to books given over to the flames. The history of burnt offerings is long and varied, but among its highlights is William Carlos Williams’s first book, “Poems” (1909), most copies of which were destroyed when the shed they were stored in burned down. (Given that Williams was known to be rather ashamed of his debut, one wonders if he had a hand in the conflagration.) There’s also *Fire!!*, the upstart effort of a younger Harlem Renaissance set that included Wallace Thurman and Zora Neale Hurston, who jokingly called themselves the Niggerati. The single-issue magazine lived up to its name when its unsold stock caught fire soon after publication. Nancy Cunard’s 1934 anthology, “Negro,” was—like many other titles—destroyed by the London Blitz. Still others fell victim to the ritualistic book burnings in Nazi Germany that provided a reminder to Americans of how fragile our freedoms are (though not enough of a reminder to stop white students in Georgia from burning a book by the Cuban-American author Jennine Capó Crucet, earlier this fall). Yet fire has effects that aren’t easily controlled. As my bookseller friend knew, its ravages often leave the remaining copies of a work all the more valuable.

Then there’s Ralph Ellison. In 1967, a fire at his country house destroyed a portion of his second novel in progress—the much anticipated and already belated follow-up to his 1952 debut, “Invisible Man.” Ellison’s account of the damage the fire caused only grew in time; as his biographer Arnold Rampersad points out, the blaze came to be depicted as the main reason that Ellison never completed the novel, despite decades of labor and masses of manuscript pages. He measured it once for an interviewer: well over a foot and a half of epic. A relatively cohesive version was assembled from drafts by John F. Callahan, his literary executor, and issued posthumously as “June-teenth,” in 1999; a decade later, Callahan and Adam Bradley crafted a thousand-page volume of fuller overlapping fragments, published as “Three Days Before the Shooting . . .” Now Callahan and Marc C. Conner have brought out “Selected Letters” (Random House), running almost as long. Bearing in mind the epistolary origins of the novel as a literary invention, one can regard the results—sixty years of correspondence progressing to a narrative—as another Ellisonian magnum opus, one necessarily unfinished.

“Selected Letters” is wisely divided by decade, starting with the nineteen-thirties, and Ellison’s voice is urgent from the start. The volume begins with letters home to Oklahoma, to his mother, Ida Bell, whom Ellison, newly matriculated at the Tuskegee Institute, in 1933, variously begs and

bosses around for things he needs. The letters are concerned with money, or, rather, its absence. Young Ellison worries over status, too, not so much asking his mother for help as demanding it: “Send me that money by money order and make it thirty dollars if possible.” He explains, “I travel with the richer gang here and this clothes problem is a pain.” Shoes, a coat, old suits, his class ring: the requests to his mother and stepfather repeat like a scratched record that still itches. “Don’t forget the uniform, it’s important” is a typical postscript.

Throughout the letters from the nineteen-thirties, Ellison shares the nation’s preoccupations: it’s the throes of the Depression, after all, and, like the popular music of the period, he’s nostalgic for better times in a place he doesn’t particularly wish to return to. Still, he writes his younger brother, Herbert, to send his regards to the “Dear Folks” back home: “Tell Dr. Youngblood that if he came here he would be married in a month. Tell him they are beautiful and brown-skinned.” If not quite “Black Is Beautiful”—a phrase that Ellison, who preferred the term “Negro” well into the nineteen-seventies, didn’t use—his homegrown aesthetic and influences are evident early.

While an undergraduate, he studied music as a trumpet player; according to his authorial mythology, he throws his horn over for writing, in which he finds a further music. But Ellison, we learn, also had a stint as a

The writer’s correspondence constitutes another magnum opus, though one—like his second novel—left unfinished.



sculptor, an equally resonant metaphor for his later craft. In an April, 1936, letter to Herbert, he writes:

Sculpture is very difficult to photograph and though one piece has been attempted it was unsuccessful. No I am not in the school of music this year. I missed out because of many matters, and have had to take the regular college course. . . . I noticed how much you had improved in your last letter; that's fine but watch your tenses and endings, don't write fool when you mean fooling or fooled. All it takes is time and good habits.

In the summer of 1936, Ellison sets out for New York, where he has the good fortune of meeting Langston Hughes in the lobby of the Harlem Y.M.C.A., where both are staying; Hughes, as he would do for many aspiring black writers, gives Ellison advice and connects him with other black practitioners. Soon Ellison is addressing Hughes as "Lang," and even stays with his adoptive aunt. "I'm following your formula with success, you know, 'be nice to people and let them pay for meals,'" he writes Hughes. "It helps so very much." He also thanks Hughes for sending him to Richmond Barthé, the African-American sculptor, who "has taken me as his first pupil much to my surprise and joy." By the later years of the decade, Ellison is finding his way, never shy about his likes and his dislikes. He tells his mother that he prefers Barthé to the better-known sculptor Augusta Savage, "who offered to let me work at her studio, but was too busy to give much instruction." (If he had joined her, he could have worked alongside Jacob Lawrence, Romare Bearden, and Charles Alston in the robust artistic community that Savage cultivated at the Y and at the 135th Street Library, across the street, which later became the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.) The letters reveal an artist searching for a form that could carry his vision of black life in all its dimensions.

Ellison was later much impressed by Lord Raglan's analysis of the hero in mythic tradition, and it is perhaps too easy to say that becoming an orphan, in the way of the archetypal hero, shook him out of his reverie. But his mother's death, in 1937, leads to what Ellison, in a letter to family friends, characterizes as the end of his childhood: "I can't explain the emptiness. It is difficult to be

grown up, and my brother and I are trying very hard to keep things under control. We walked to a movie today and ate candy and talked of old times on the way home. I was very glad the movie was dark."

By the nineteen-forties, Ellison's key correspondent is Richard Wright, who, six years older, becomes something of a big brother. (It was Hughes, naturally, who introduced them.) Ellison's closeness with Wright brings out some of his frankest early letters. He gossips about the Harlem scene and about those scandalized by Wright's best-seller "Native Son" (1940): "Native Son shook the Harlem section to its foundation and some of the rot it has brought up is painful to smell. I have talked about the book, trying to answer attacks against it until I am weary." Such private loyalty produces a more complex picture than his own essays might. Although he never fully attacked "Native Son," Ellison lamented that Wright, who would always be best known for creating Bigger Thomas, "could never bring himself to conceive a character as complicated as himself."

His correspondence with Wright reminds us that at this time he himself was a radical, orbiting the Communist Party and writing for the *New Masses*, where many of his important early essays appeared. He explains the domestic scene to Wright, the native son who had decamped to Paris; Ellison himself, apart from residencies and weekend homes in New England and later Key West, would make Harlem his permanent home. Soon he confides his growing sense of himself as a budding writer. "You told me I would begin to write when I matured emotionally, when I began to feel what I understood," he writes in the spring of 1940. In the fall of 1941, he signals another start: "I'm not really a critic, but something else. Each little critical thing I try to say is really not criticism at all, but a stroke, no matter how feeble, in our battle." Ellison's response to Wright's photo essay of that year, "12 Million Black Voices," which marshalled images from the Farm Security Administration to suggest the power of the race, has the quality of a manifesto:

After reading your history—I knew it already, all in my blood, bones, flesh; deepest memories, and thoughts; those which are sacred and those which bring the bitterest agonies

and most poignant remembrances and regrets—after reading it and experiencing the pictures, the concrete images, I was convinced that we people of emotion shall land the most telling strokes, the destructive-creative blows in the struggle. And we shall do it with books like this!

Part of my life, Dick, has been a lacerating experience and I have my share of bitterness. But I have learned to keep the bitterness submerged so that my vision might be kept clear; so that those passions that could so easily be criminal might be socially useful. I know those emotions which tear the insides to be free and memories which must be kept underground, caged by rigid discipline lest they destroy, but which yet are precious to me because they are mine and I am proud of that which is myself.

The evocation of the underground presages the dramatic opening of "Invisible Man," with its protagonist in a basement room illuminated by stolen electricity, a blaze of light bulbs, and the conviction of words.

Both men are about to leave their first wives—only one letter from Ellison to his wife Rose Poindexter survives—and, by 1942, Ellison is sending conflicted letters to Sanora Babb, a white fiction writer, also born in Oklahoma, with whom he had a weeklong but intense affair. "I think about you constantly," he writes. "It was no 'rare holiday' but the start of a new phase of my life." This new life, however, began not with Babb but with Fanny McConnell, a sometime writer for the *Chicago Defender*, whom he met in June, 1944, and married as soon as his divorce was official. For the next five decades, until his death, Fanny was a constant companion, champion, and, whenever apart, correspondent.

Just as the invisible man's retreat is a hibernation in preparation for future action, Ellison's letters, it becomes clear, are a map of his planned advance, culminating in one of the most celebrated novels of the last century. His correspondence charts the turning away from socialism and social realism that would produce his novel's potent surreality. He was not alone in this, of course: a homemade surrealism infuses the folk and blues traditions that Hughes and Hurston mined. "I told Langston Hughes in fact, that it's the blues, but nobody seems to understand what I mean," he later writes to a friend about the novel now under way.

Folk origins were something he was arguing about as early as 1948 with his

“friend and intellectual sparring partner” Stanley Hyman: “I believe that myth and ritual are always with us—if only we get the rational wool out of our eyes and see the pre-rational fleece. . . . Besides, too great a concern with *origin* degenerates too easily into a concern with purity, and folklore is most impure.” The same letter offers praise for “The Lottery,” by Hyman’s wife, Shirley Jackson, tying its violent rites to his own efforts: “We’re beginning to work the same vein.” Later, when asked about influences, Ellison would regularly invoke some (T. S. Eliot, Lord Raglan, Dostoyevsky, the blues) while remaining silent about others—such as his experience with the Federal Writers’ Project working on a guide to New York. The day-to-day writing of the guide (which was never published) and his man-on-the-street reporting for it not only influenced his use of language but often provided exact exchanges repurposed for his novel.

Nearly a third of the letters from the fifties are to his good friend Albert Murray. The two had overlapped at Tuskegee, and a chance encounter in New York reunited them. In 1950, Ellison confesses to Murray (who had returned to Tuskegee to teach) his fears about his novel in progress: “If I ever complete my endless you-know-what you’ll get a chance to see what different things we make of a common reality. . . . It is a rock around my neck; a dream, a nasty compulsive dream which I no longer write but now am acting out.” In their letters—Callahan published a volume devoted to their jazzlike exchanges in 2000—Murray and Ellison are jointly creating an aesthetic idea about America, or an American notion of aesthetics, emphasizing the improvisatory genius of black culture, on the one hand, and the centrality of that culture to American life, on the other. After Ellison turns “Invisible Man” over to his publisher, he writes to Murray, “You are hereby warned that I have dropped the shuck.”

While in the forties he was declaring to Wright, “We are the ones who had no comforting amnesia of childhood, and for whom the trauma of passing from the country to the city of destruction brought no anesthesia of unconsciousness, but left our nerves peeled and quivering,” with Murray, in



BRIEFLY NOTED

Serotonin, by Michel Houellebecq, translated from the French by Shaun Whiteside (Farrar, Straus & Giroux). In this novel of midlife collapse, Houellebecq reprises his attack on the ideological pretensions of contemporary Western society. A misanthropic agronomist, after discovering the infidelity of his girlfriend (whom he already despised), abandons Paris—“infested with eco-friendly bourgeois”—for Normandy, where he once lived and loved happily. But the countryside proves just as bleak: free trade has devastated agriculture, farmers are resorting to violence, and insipid liberal notions of progress have stripped the world of eros and beauty. Houellebecq indulges in his trademark offensiveness, but the misogynist jabs feel pro forma. More notable is the specificity of his satire—he has a degree in agronomy—and the seriousness of his engagement with the economic asperities of provincial France in the era of the *gilets jaunes*.



Salt Slow, by Julia Armfield (Flatiron). The girls and women in this debut collection of stories are monstrous: they molt, peel, fracture, decompose, murder, consume, engulf. Pubescent girls shed skin and teeth as new appetites awaken; mysterious music arouses violence and obsession in the girls who hear it. When the inhabitants of a city lose their ability to sleep, one woman’s sleep steps out of her and begins to move around on its own. Such metamorphoses—regarded with horror by male characters but with equanimity by the women—are both delightful and discomfiting, like the dead bats one woman receives from her sister: “gory little offerings, dank-furred and often still twitching.”



Home Now, by Cynthia Anderson (PublicAffairs). In 2006, a man rolled a pig’s head through the doorway of a mosque in Lewiston, Maine. Anderson, a journalist who grew up nearby, chronicles the transformation of a formerly white town by an influx of Somali refugees, drawing on the perspectives of old and new residents. The result is a varied political picture: immigration to Lewiston has revitalized the town, after decades of decline, but, in 2016, Maine gave Trump his only electoral-college vote in New England. Anderson is critical of the systems that vet and support refugees, and deplores the attitude of liberals who, fearful of seeming “insensitive” or of providing “ammunition to haters,” avoid discussion of any problems.



The Mysterious Affair at Olivetti, by Meryle Secrest (Knopf). In 1960, Adriano Olivetti, the second-generation head of Olivetti, the Italian company famous for its typewriters, died on a train, apparently of a heart attack. This tantalizing history, however, argues that he was murdered—collateral damage in a Cold War struggle over technology. Secrest marshals an impressive array of circumstantial evidence encompassing the shadowy web of business, politics, and espionage that ensnared postwar Italy. Her account is rooted in a colorful portrait of Adriano himself, a Socialist who dreamed of “enlightened capitalism,” had just launched a personal-computer division, and planned to sell his computers in Russia and China.

the fifties, he relaxed into a fluid black style that embodies a new, artful ideal:

Was also offered Brandeis job teaching creative writing and one course in American Lit, which I had to refuse; but the cat wrote back and said he'd cool it for me until Fall, '57. Looks like they're ganging up trying to make an honest man out of me, a lo mo, natural born hustler! Because just about the same time the man at Bennington wrote offering a job substituting for a cat next year at a take of \$5500 plus housing. That one was right in my old briar patch, but looks like Brandeis will be the pitch because it's right in the Cambridge area and I'd like to operate among the Harvard brains a while so that I can see what they're really putting down.

This isn't about slang but about hustle, a register of improvisation and ease that one wishes Ellison had been able to continue more fully in fiction after "Invisible Man."

The Murray letters aside, Ellison's correspondence is markedly different after the novel's commercial and critical success, which included a National Book Award. His correspondents in the nineteen-fifties—his most prolific period in his public and private writings—are often editors and other writers we now think of as contenders for producing the Great American Novel. He can now, during an American Academy residency in Rome, in 1956, complain that "the talk here ain't very good." He writes to Saul Bellow (who had published a glowing review of "Invisible Man") after Bellow's divorce, "In truth, we're *both* in exile." It was with Murray that he enjoyed the talk he complained about missing in Rome—exchanges with a writer he respects and who didn't become friends with him only after he came to occupy Wright's acclaimed, one-at-a-time-please, black-best-seller space.

Not that Ellison would easily relinquish that crown and its thorns. By the nineteen-sixties, many of the letters are responses to queries and fan mail, clarifications for curious readers and bibliographers and producers of academic studies. Ellison is often setting the record straight: no, he wasn't influenced by Dante but by those, like Eliot, who had read Dante; no, his biggest influence was not Richard Wright. The far more intimate letters to Murray cease in the sixties, presumably because they were now Harlem neighbors. Yet it can start to feel that such intimacy has become

more elusive for Ellison, who has become less the Great Black Hope than the Great Explainer. And explanations, interesting though they might be, do not a novel make.

Ellison's own hopes are tied to his second novel, whose theme he takes to be "the evasion of identity." As early as his "shuck" letter to Murray, in 1951, he mentions that he's "trying to get started on my next novel (I probably have enough stuff left from the other if I can find the form)." The reference gains poignance with time. The pressure to follow what is rightly considered one of the greatest novels of the twentieth century is both unfair and inevitable. But by the time of the 1967 house fire it had already been fifteen years since "Invisible Man" was published. Even late in this volume, the fire remains central, at least in the story Ellison cannot tell.

The first mention of the fire by Ellison is almost clinical in its assessment, deployed as an excuse for turning down a professor's blurb request: "bad luck has fallen upon us. On the late afternoon of November 29th our home in Plainfield, Massachusetts was destroyed by fire. The loss was particularly severe for me, as a section of my work-in-progress was destroyed with it." It is apparently nine months later when he and Fanny go to examine the damage, finding "a scene of desolation. A forlorn



chimney standing stark and crumbling above a cellar-hole full of crushed and rusting appliance, broken crockery, ashes." In the fullest account of the event—oddly, written to his new tailor, the owner of the preppy Andover Shop, in Cambridge, whom he'd only just met—Ellison relates, "It's a drag and Lord knows when we'll be able to have the junk hauled away, the chimney collapsed and the hole filled in. But one thing is certain, we won't try to rebuild

right away." Ultimately, it is his second, shadow novel that Ellison won't rebuild—or perhaps rebuilds too much, expanding it beyond what its foundation could support. The rest of the letter is breezily taken up with racehorses and shoes, cameras and hi-fi equipment.

The later letters portray a novelist busily not finishing his novel, despite working on it; along with his essays, gathered in two collections while he was alive, these letters contain his most extended, indispensable riffs. Earlier letters reacting to the Brown v. Board decision are remarkable, tying the hopes for his new novel with the hopes of a nation. ("Here's to integration, the only integration that counts: that of the personality.") But these later letters find a mind who could no longer attach his personal ambitions to the larger struggles of his day. He was, of course, writing in a fiery time, as conjured by "Cadillac Flambé," one of the few portions of the work in progress published during his lifetime; in it, a jazz musician, having heard a racist senator suggest that the Cadillac be renamed "Coon Cage Eight," drives his own gleaming white Caddy to the senator's estate and sets it on fire in protest. And yet you'll find no letters here noting Ellison's reaction to Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination or to the cities literally burning.

Going from iconoclastic to iconic, Ellison's stature gains a burdensome gravity. If his rise is an American story—one of self-made success, and, in the familiar turn, of the toll such success can bring—his second act is more complicated. Where the letters from the nineteen-forties are preparations for a strike and those from the fifties reverberate with his novelistic achievement, the later letters can start to feel like a way of avoiding the wider world, a world that this writer required in order to create. One feels, in these letters, an art that circles loss.

Many letters from the seventies attack the lazy suggestions, from reviewers and friends alike, that he was either too influenced by Wright (he tells Hyman, "evidently you see the possibility of one writer influencing another as a one-way street") or too harsh to the writer he called brother. "I have no idea where you found your reviewer," he protests to the editor of *Life* in May, 1970,

“but I can assure you that he knows even less of my politics than he knows of my relationship with Richard Wright or of my writings.” One wonders what would have happened if, instead of spending energy and pages on such a rebuttal, quoting extensively from his older essays, he had written a memoir of their friendship and settled the matter. (He gave a lecture titled “Remembering Richard Wright” in 1971 but didn’t publish it until 1986.)

Ellison’s hard-won independence may also have contributed to his irritation with the changes that Black Power and the Black Arts Movement wrought. The movement in general thought him less than generous with other writers, even retrograde—black students on campus during the nineteen-sixties would sometimes literally call him out—in contrast to, say, Hughes, who helped younger writers to the end, or Gwendolyn Brooks, who embraced the younger generation and the Afro. Ellison would dismiss Hughes, who had dedicated his 1951 masterpiece, “Montage of a Dream Deferred,” to Ralph and Fanny, and later denied Michel Fabre, a white Frenchman who published an important study of African-American literature, the chance to reprint his early stories, saying that he was finishing new ones. (None were completed.) Ellison could still offer frank and fascinating appraisals, writing a foreword to Leon Forrest’s first novel, “There Is a Tree More Ancient Than Eden,” or writing what serves as a letter of recommendation for Albert Murray. But he’s silent on many other writers during the black boom of the seventies, especially women. (Toni Morrison told Rampersad, “He never mentioned any of my books to me, or complimented me as a writer, as I did him.”)

Some of Ellison’s most powerful letters of the period are about and to the fiction writer James Alan McPherson. Writing to an editor in what amounts to a blurb, Ellison praises him even as he damns others: “With this collection of stories, McPherson promises to move right past those talented but misguided writers of Negro American cultural background who take being black as a privilege for being obscenely second-rate, and who regard their social predicament as Negroes as exempting



them from the necessity of mastering the craft and forms of fiction.” In 1970, McPherson interviewed Ellison for a cover story in *The Atlantic* that helped reestablish his importance, ratifying Ellison’s increasingly accepted view of blackness as central to the American story. In an era of fiery contention, the idea was radical while offering the possibility of reconciliation.

Then McPherson made the unforgivable mistake of winning the Pulitzer Prize, in 1978, for his second book of short stories, becoming the first black writer to do so in fiction. When the MacArthur Foundation was considering McPherson for the first of its “genius” grants, in 1981, Ellison wrote the foundation a poison-pen letter decrying McPherson’s “current restlessness,” and blaming his putative failures on “a condition of shock brought on by a long-delayed social mobility suddenly achieved,” while recommending others for the honor. (The foundation was ultimately undeterred.) That infamous letter is not included here—an understandable omission, perhaps, but a cause for regret. As is, we have only traces of the fallout, without McPherson’s voice as a correspondent. We miss out, as does Ellison, on one of his chief inheritors: a writer who had worked on the railroad in his teens, in ways you’d have thought “hobo son” Ellison would have appreciated. He was, instead, blind to

the ways that McPherson, like the invisible man himself, was making an art of restlessness. As it turned out, McPherson, too, wrestled with his success—after a twenty-year silence following his Pulitzer, he did manage to return to print, issuing compelling essays and a memoir but no more books of fiction.

Ellison remained trapped between the castle of his towering first novel and the growing moat of his second. And yet, up until his death, in 1994, he continued to write letters in which the home fires were still burning. He reminisced with his nonagenarian music teacher from Tuskegee and wrote Robert Penn Warren’s wife, Eleanor, that “when a natural-born liar like myself starts recalling the past he’s sure to stray into myth-making.” He invoked Oklahoma and “the Territory” more and more, his missives growing longer and longer, stoked with what amounts to spontaneous essays valuable for their vision and verve. It is here that the best of the later Ellison is found. The words he sent in 1947 to Fanny, who was working on a short story of her own, seemed truer than ever: “You mustn’t assume that aesthetic expression is the prime motive for writing; it is really only a means to the more profound end. So don’t worry about it if you write out of sadness or hate or love—fear—or fascination, the important thing, if you wish to do it, is to write.” ♦

DANCE ABOUT DANCE

Burial's search for fleeting moments.

BY HUA HSU



You go out to dance—or to nod your head—with the promise of mystery. You might hear the most enchanting tune ever, and never discover what it was. A band at least tells you its name. D.j.s keep secrets; their selections are often hidden from view, and return to you in fragments—a hellish bass line, a sped-up vocal, drums that reprogram your bodily rhythms. So much of the ritual of dance music involves trying to recover a moment that just whizzed past you, a couple of fleeting minutes that were part of a d.j.'s hours-long mix, a few steps along a continuous journey. Your only clues are how it felt.

The London producer Burial makes

music about dance music—about that search for something life-changing. He began releasing singles in the early two-thousands, on Hyperdub, a label run by the musician, d.j., and theorist Steve Goodman. Goodman, who records as Kode9, and Burial met online; they shared an interest in the emotional spectrum encompassed by dance music. The history of pop includes odes to love and longing, happiness and sadness. But dance subgenres, such as jungle or garage, seek to express something different: the thrill of tearing through the space-time continuum, a fascination with tomorrow, a desire to accelerate toward new horizons faster than seems possible.

Much of listening to dance music consists of trying to recover a feeling.

What made Burial's initial releases unusual were the drums, which sounded purposefully muddled. His attempt at reproducing garage's gleeful, striding rhythms ended up feeling desolate and dark, like someone skipping through the mud. At first, he enjoyed a kind of anonymity, which lent his misty, spooky music a bit of mystery. Only a handful of people knew who he was, and his tracks refused moments of collective catharsis. Instead of dubstep's famed "drop," the frenzied breakdown that functions like a twenty-first-century guitar solo, there were tiny pockets of sublimity, akin to the majestic digital fanfare that awaits you after hours spent battling the final boss in a video game. His first albums—"Burial," from 2006, and "Untrue," from the following year, which was nominated for the Mercury Prize—didn't feel like efforts at building community, the way that dance music often feels. They sounded like a solitary wanderer's midnight explorations, chasing snippets of R. & B. rattling from cars, bass zaps bleeding from someone else's headphones.

In the years since "Untrue," Burial has released a series of singles and EPs, all of which seem to toggle between shapeless, ambient excursions and sample-driven homages to beloved niche dance music of the past. "Tunes 2011 to 2019," his new album, consists of previously released music, though Hyperdub notes that much of it is not widely available on CD. The tracks are sequenced in a somewhat counterintuitive way, and it's a sign of Burial's mystique that his editorial choices feel freighted with meaning. For example, nothing resembling a drum is heard until about twenty-six minutes in. Instead, the album opens with "State Forest," "Beachfires," and "Subtemple," aggressively quiet tracks that sound more like a thief cracking a safe than like music. By leading with these tracks, which even some hardcore fans find dull, Burial almost seems to be conducting an exercise in listening; you start to notice the rumbling ambience of night. Once the song "Young Death" enters this void, its wobbly synth and barely audible kick drum feel almost overwhelming.

When Burial was nominated for the Mercury Prize, a British tabloid writer tried to figure out his true identity, but

was thwarted in part by Burial's fans, who wanted him to live according to his own choices. As the curiosity about his identity started to overshadow his work, though, Burial revealed his name: William Emmanuel Bevan. Still, he refused to do interviews or to perform live shows, and he claimed to have little interest in the Internet. If he really did stay logged off, then he was perhaps unaware that he was at the vanguard of a movement—in dance music, as well as in hip-hop and R. & B.—to make tunes that were essentially studies in mood or vibe, sonic sketches of twenty-first-century life's eerie uncertainty. His devotees heard his influence in acts ranging from James Blake and Drake to Skrillex and the rock band the 1975.

Bevan is probably about forty years old, and he inherited his love of dance music from his older brother, who, when Bevan was a child, would go out at night and report back about what he heard. The brothers would listen to new twelve-inch jungle records together, and Bevan would imagine what it was like to experience these sounds in their native environment. This helps explain the somewhat voyeuristic aspect of his music, the way that it always feels as if you're lurking, or just drifting through a scene. Nevertheless, he managed to capture something essential about the draw of night life, particularly for lonely and despairing oddballs. In the late eighties and early nineties of Bevan's imagination, you didn't necessarily go to a rave to watch someone d.j. There was no hierarchy and no center; it was all edges, all margins, transient moments of communion.

Burial's greatest talent is for listening, and for noticing what most of us take for granted. On "Untrue," he built his tracks around vocal samples, most of which became utterly unrecognizable in his hands. He took passages by Beyoncé or Sarah McLachlan and stretched them until they were stripped of anything that would identify them as male or female, black or white, human or not. At other times, he rearranged the lyrics until the expressions of pop yearning began to sound forlorn and alien. He made his first album using outdated software, and has attributed most of what people found innovative

to his own amateur resourcefulness. He sampled sound effects from video games, like Metal Gear Solid: the clink of a shell casing hitting the ground was redeployed as rhythm. He applied crackle and hiss to his songs in order to distract from parts he found rough and lame.

One of the only interviews he's ever granted was to the late critic Mark Fisher, who, in 2007, profiled him for *The Wire*. They were kindred spirits, deep listeners obsessed with visions of a future that never arrived. While Fisher lamented the politics of the present, Bevan felt a kind of secondhand nostalgia. The provisional utopias of illegal dance parties in the eighties and nineties hadn't succeeded in uniting the masses. Back then, he told Fisher, the ravers "weren't running ahead or falling behind, they were just right there and the tunes meant everything." That spirit of wanderlust was now gone.

"Tunes 2011 to 2019" tracks a period when Burial's fans started combing his songs for clues about his state of being. His music began to feel increasingly self-referential, possibly confessional. Hidden under the squall of "Rival Dealer" is a clip of a British man talking plainly about his bisexuality. "Come Down to Us," a slow-motion traipse through an enchanted forest, ends with a sample of the director Lana Wachowski talking about having felt "broken" and like "a freak," until she declared that she was transgender.

Wachowski goes on to discuss the concept of a room beyond the room we find ourselves in—a thumbnail gloss of her most famous work, "The Matrix" (co-directed with her sister Lilly Wachowski). What makes Burial's music so captivating is that you can go wherever you want inside it. The songs offer shelter. And, rather than describing a place you wish to go, they seem to depict places you have already been. There are distant echoes to be followed. It's about coming down on the way home, the invincibility you felt an hour ago ebbing as you ride the bus. His music chases the thrill of music itself, the feeling of a new sound passing through your body. And you remember what you thought the future would sound like, how it would feel, and you try to go there, still. ♦

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ON TELEVISION

NOT ALL HEROES

Damon Lindelof's mind-bending "Watchmen."

BY EMILY NUSSBAUM



In the opening sequence of Damon Lindelof's version of Alan Moore's 1986 graphic novel, "Watchmen," a seven-year-old black boy sits alone in the Dreamland, a Tulsa cinema, staring rapt at a flickering silent Western called "Trust in the Law." The hero is Bass Reeves, the Black Marshal of Oklahoma, a handsome figure who pulls off a black hood to reveal a badge. On-screen, another boy, this one white, gazes in admiration at the Marshal, as he saves the day. "There will be no mob justice today! *Trust in the law*," Reeves says, as the boy in the audience says the words with him, smiling. Just then, a siren goes off outside the theatre. The black boy

is about to be swept up in the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre—the country's most significant incident of racial terrorism, during which the city's "Black Wall Street" was strafed by planes and burned to the ground by white supremacists, abetted by the National Guard. It's a true story that will be left out of schoolbooks, mislabelled a "race riot," and deliberately forgotten. So will Reeves's story, also real. We don't find out what happens to the boy until five episodes later, but, when we do, it's a doozy.

That opening sequence pulls to the surface themes of racial violence that never appear directly in Moore's graphic novel, although they seethe at the mar-

gins, coded in Reagan-era fear of urban chaos. It's not necessary to read the source material in order to "get" the show, but it wouldn't hurt. A quick primer: the original "Watchmen" is set in an alternate time line, beginning in the nineteen-forties, among a group of bickering masked vigilantes, the Minutemen. The team includes one guy dressed like an owl and another like a moth; a savvy sexpot, Silk Spectre, and her cynical daughter, Laurie; a mentally ill anti-hero named Rorschach; the all-American Captain Metropolis; a Vietnam vet; a bright-blue, naked, nuclear-powered *Übermensch*; a preening billionaire, Ozymandias; Hooded Justice, who wears a noose; and others, some barely walk-ons. In the final passages, Ozymandias decimates New York with an attack designed to look like an alien-squid invasion—his aim is to avert nuclear war by unifying the United States and the U.S.S.R. against an imaginary foe. Crazily, the plan succeeds.

A foundational work for comics fans, "Watchmen" is a lurid, freewheeling satire, interrogating the American worship of violent superheroes. (And, in certain ways, glamorizing that tendency: it's one of the comics that launched the gritty-reboot trend that led to "The Joker.") Lindelof's update, on HBO, is equally swashbuckling and absurdist, but it has complex aims: it focusses on what's missing from the original. Though it jumps around in time, it is set largely in Tulsa in 2019, three decades after that alien-squid attack, a national trauma that is memorialized as "11/2." (There's also a major subplot, so baroque I don't even have the space to cover it, that is set on one of Jupiter's moons, in a mansion filled with slave clones.) Robert Redford is the President; Vietnam is the fifty-first state. There are new characters, several of whom work as cops, under bizarre conditions: after a wave of anti-police violence, Tulsa cops are required to adopt secret identities, wear masks, and conceal their jobs even from their family members.

Initially, Lindelof seems to be modernizing the story in the earnest way that many TV shows do: by making the cast diverse. Angela Akbar (Regina King), a.k.a. Sister Night, is a gun-toting maverick who snaps, "I got a nose for white supremacy and I smell bleach,"

"Watchmen" is Lindelof's third series about a society struggling with trauma.

and who beats information out of racists. The series also reboots the villains, now the racist Seventh Cavalry, a cult of redneck terrorists who live in a trailer park called Nixontown and worship the quasi-fascist Rorschach.

But, from early on, there's a tingling, cathartic uneasiness to this inversion. What are we to make of a story in which the starkest narratives of Black Lives Matter are replicated, only with a black cop and a white victim? In which the police kidnap suspects, then test them for bigotry? It takes a while to sort out the history, but, once it begins to unfold, it's a bombshell. Lindelof's "Watchmen" reorders the fictional universe, writing buried racial trauma—from slavery to lynching—back into comic-book mythology, as both its source and its original sin, stemming from the Ku Klux Klan, a group reawakened, back in 1915, by the original masked-hero blockbuster, "The Birth of a Nation."

"**W**atchmen" is Lindelof's third series about a society struggling with unresolved trauma, and in certain ways it's a natural follow-up to both "Lost," a post-9/11 story about a mysterious plane crash, and "The Leftovers," about the disappearance of two per cent of the population. Like those series, and like its source material, "Watchmen" is a gaudily self-conscious puzzle box, with a chopped-up chronology, playful references to its own artificiality (one episode is called "If You Don't Like My Story, Write Your Own"), and art-within-art elements like "Trust in the Law," comic books, TV shows, puppet shows, and museum displays, some telling the myths of the Minutemen, who are celebrities in this fictional world. Like "Lost," "Watchmen" includes fable-like psychological flashbacks. Like "The Leftovers," it's fuelled by cockeyed, hyper-saturated imagery, including dreamlike visions—piglets racing across a courtroom; cracked eggs that resolve into a smiley face—that don't need to be fully understood to be effective.

But there's been a fascinating progression in the creator's approach to race. "Lost," when it debuted, in 2004, had a refreshingly inclusive concept, with diverse survivors forced to form a new society. This variety proved superfi-

cial, as the seasons passed; by the show's finale, four white men were vying for leadership. "The Leftovers" began, in 2014, with a mostly white ensemble, but in the second season—like several other TV dramas during that period—the creators added black characters, including a family whose mother was played by King. By the final season, however, those characters had faded in importance, suggesting something thin, if well intended, about their presence.

In "Watchmen," in contrast, blackness is the root of the story, as well as its underlying purpose: it's a show about the potential for pop culture to treat black identity as a default, and, more specifically, about the idea of African-Americans playing roles (in both senses) from which they've often been excluded, among them soldiers, cops, and superheroes. It is in conversation with a wide set of modern debates about representation: the fan wars that flame up around pop hits like "Star Wars," "Black Panther," and "Spiderverse," as well as discussions about reboots like the all-female "Ghostbusters," cross-casting and appropriation, and so on. But the show is also in synch with conspiratorial fears about American justice, the sense that there's no way to wear the badge without being stained.

Or conned, for that matter. All of Lindelof's shows are full of grifters and shills, and in "Watchmen" that situation is racialized, through stories about the vulnerability of black people in white institutions, trusting white allies only to be betrayed. In the opening episode, Angela's beloved boss, a white sheriff named Judd, is lynched by an elderly black man, who turns out to be her grandfather, whom she's never met. Later, when Angela opens the closet in Judd's bedroom, as her grandfather has advised her to do, she discovers her worst fear: a Klan robe. It seems as if Judd had been secretly working with the Seventh Cavalry. There are multiple plots woven together in the show—there's an amazing episode about Looking Glass, a masked cop who survived 11/2—but Angela's journey is its center.

In the phenomenal sixth episode, co-written by Lindelof and Cord Jefferson, Angela overdoses on a drug called Nostalgia, which lets the user reexperience old memories—but the pills be-

long to her grandfather. "It's dangerous to take someone else's Nostalgia," she's warned, in a line that could be the show's motto. She drops down a tunnel of inherited trauma, and what she finds there rewrites not just her own history but the mythology she's inside.

As it turns out, her grandfather, Will Reeves, was the Minuteman Hooded Justice. In Moore's version, Hooded Justice was a minor character, the one Minuteman whose face we never saw—although he's coded as white, and hinted to be both a Russian strongman and a Nazi, in a secret gay relationship with Captain Metropolis. Hooded Justice is also present in Angela's universe: on a cheesy TV dramatization called "American Hero Story," he's portrayed as a gay white man. In both versions, though, he's the original masked hero, who inspired the other Minutemen to fight evil.

In reality, he's black—he's the sweet boy we saw watching "Trust in the Law," a survivor of the Tulsa massacre who grew up to be a cop, imitating (and taking the surname of) the black marshal he admired. Only then, as the pride of his community, featured in the *Amsterdam News*, did he confront the truth: not only would his white colleagues never accept him but they were also secret racists, part of a Klan conspiracy called Cyclops. Will is nearly lynched by other officers—and when he pulls on a hood, to fight crime anonymously, he continues to wear the noose. It is his white lover, Captain Metropolis, who tells him to keep his face hidden: audiences aren't ready for a black hero. The Minutemen shrug off his battle against the Klan, too, forcing him to fight alone.

It's a radical revision that is logical and emotionally resonant, a new myth that burns off the old one. How could Hooded Justice be anything *other* than black? In a set of elegantly edited sequences, Angela's face and Will's face trade places. She gets his badge, she's hanged, she absorbs his rage—it's like a dark twist on those jokes about how black people are the least likely to want to try time travel. But the episode itself is a kind of time traveller, revising Moore's myths. In Lindelof's shows, stories are always a kind of con—they're how we shape the truth, to suit our fantasies. And, if you can't see yourself in the legend, who are you? ♦

HISTORY GIRLS

"The Aeronauts" and "Portrait of a Lady on Fire."

BY ANTHONY LANE

The casting of Eddie Redmayne as James Glaisher, in *"The Aeronauts,"* is an excellent joke. Glaisher was a solidly built Victorian Englishman, whose whiskers suggested an amateur interest in forestry. By 1862, when the bulk of the movie takes place, he was fifty-three, married, and employed as the superintendent of the Magnetic and Meteo-

1862, to what was then a world-record height of some seven miles above the Earth. His duties were mainly instrumental: taking readings of temperature, atmospheric pressure, and so forth. Beside him was one Henry Coxwell, who piloted the balloon; of the brave and experienced Mr. Coxwell, however, not a trace remains onscreen. His role is



Eddie Redmayne and Felicity Jones star in Tom Harper's film.

rological Department at the Royal Observatory, in Greenwich. He was also a fellow of the Royal Astronomical Society. The Glaisher of the film, by contrast, is a shy bachelor who pays dutiful visits to his parents and struggles to persuade his scientific comrades to take him seriously. And Redmayne is, well, Redmayne—spookily youthful, febrile, feather-slim, and sensitive to every gust of emotion. You half expect him to be borne away on the breeze.

The film is written by Jack Thorne and directed by Tom Harper. It is also linked, by the loosest of guy ropes, to *"Falling Upwards,"* Richard Holmes's buoyant survey of ballooning pioneers. Glaisher is a hero of the book, one highlight being his ascent, on September 5,

subsumed into that of the fictitious and flamboyant—though thankfully not inflammable—Amelia Wren (Felicity Jones). The widow of another balloonist, she knows (a) how to launch the lovely gas-filled globe and steer it toward the heavens, and (b) no fear.

The action is divided between land and sky, and the sky is the runaway winner. Many of the scenes at ground level are frequented by disputatious gents in top hats, although the departure of the aeronauts, at the outset, is a rowdy spectacle—fireworks, a cheering mob, and a dog named Posey, who, flung from the balloon, parachutes to terra firma without a yap. As for Wren, she rolls up like a circus performer, with rouged cheeks, and turns cartwheels in a frothy

skirt. (Later, when the crowds are far below, she dons oilskins to keep out the cold.) The movie is nodding, I guess, to the French balloonist Sophie Blanchard, who rose to fame in the Napoleonic age, favoring a silver gondola in place of a basket, and plunged to her death in 1819, when the rockets that she gaily, if unwisely, included in her act ignited the balloon.

The uneasy tussle between theatricality and solemn purpose—unsurprising, given that new means of exploration tend to be low on funds—is a constant theme in *"Falling Upwards,"* and it pretty much defines the curious mood of Harper's film. Whereas the real Glaisher was absorbed in scholarly measurements, the movie's Glaisher seems desultory and discursive, taking time out for a chat about marriage and other terrestrial niceties. As the air thins, though, and the chill intensifies, he slumps to the floor of the basket, insensible, leaving Miss Wren, flying solo, to save the day.

This she does. The gas valve at the top of the globe gets frozen stuck, making descent impossible, so she clambers up the rigging and grabs the rope netting that envelops the balloon like a string bag around a pumpkin. Then she circumcrawls her own floating world (I found myself thinking of the *Little Prince*) and collapses at its north pole, though not before stamping the valve open. Here's the paradox: the closer *"The Aeronauts"* gets to peak silliness, the more beautiful it becomes. The whole crawling sequence is a travesty; in reality, the valve *did* stick, but Coxwell, unable to use his frosty fingers, yanked the appropriate cord with his teeth. In reaching these heights of fancy, however, the movie achieves, to use one of Glaisher's own words, "rarefaction." If you recall the medieval balloon that swept over the Russian landscape at the start of Tarkovsky's *"Andrei Rublev"* (1966), you may, briefly, feel the same desperate, lyrical rush as you watch the miraculous ascension of Amelia Wren. At this altitude, she is oxygenated by pure pluck. You hold your breath, for she has none to hold.

There is a fine moment, all the more striking for its simplicity, in Céline Sciamma's new film, *"Portrait of a Lady on Fire."* Two lovers, on the verge of consummating their desire, exchange

what sound like sweet nothings. “You dreamt of me?” one asks. “No,” the other says, “I thought of you.” The moment is, in fact, a sweet something—a kind of duel. A romantic idea of love crosses swords with a classical notion: the urge to swoon, in forgetfulness of everything else, meets the clear-eyed claims of rational concentration. Both attitudes, as befits a story set in France in the autumn of the eighteenth century, have much to be said for them. Love lays down rules that it delights to break.

This is Sciamma’s first venture into historical drama. Her previous movie, “Girlhood” (2014), was about black teenage girls, and the lure of gang culture, in the suburbs of modern Paris. The new film is about young white gentlewomen, and the demands of art, on the remote shores of Brittany. Any prospect that the change of scene might make for more placid viewing is dispelled within minutes, as a painter named Marianne (Noémie Merlant) leaps fully clothed into a lurching sea. She is being rowed by sailors (the last men we will glimpse for a couple of hours) toward a beach, but the flat wooden crate containing her canvases—her livelihood—is washed overboard, and she hastens to rescue it as she would a drowning child. Nothing is said or shouted, the editing is fiercely concise, and we realize that we are in the presence of a determined soul.

Marianne has a job to do. She must climb a cliff, make her way to a half-empty house, dry off, settle in, and paint a portrait of a young woman (Adèle Haenel). The portrait, too, has a job: it is to be sent to the woman’s intended husband, in Milan. Immediately, we sense the grip of a social contract. The

woman is being advertised, like a product, to a man who presumably wants an accurate description of what he will soon possess. But there’s a hitch. The woman—taciturn, angry, and tense with pride—refuses to pose. A previous artist tried to depict her and failed, leaving behind, on an unfinished canvas, a figure without a face. All of which means that, as the woman’s mother (Valeria Golino) explains, Marianne’s mission is an unusually delicate one: “You must paint her without her knowing.”

What a great premise for a film. We are accustomed to hidden cameras, but how do you paint on the sly? Witness Marianne, crouched in the lee of a rock beside the ocean, roughing out a secret sketch of her subject, like a drinker swigging in shame. At last, she admits to her ruse, and shows the completed work. “Is that me?” the young woman asks, not scorning Marianne’s skill so much as questioning her presumption, as if to say, “Just because you’ve captured my likeness, what makes you think you’ve captured *me*? What if I don’t want to be caught?” It’s no accident that three-quarters of an hour pass before we learn her name, Héloïse.

Now and then, “Portrait of a Lady on Fire” acquires the dryness of a tract. Marianne, for example, asked why women are forbidden to draw naked men, replies, “It’s mostly to prevent us from doing great art.” Professors of film theory should brace themselves for an avalanche of graduate theses on the female gaze in the cinema of Céline Sciamma. For the most part, however, the tale is defiantly tactile. It couldn’t be fresher if it were mixed on a palette in front of us, and the intensity with which, in the second

half, the two women look themselves into love, as it were, is fleshly, funny, and sublimely *untheoretical*. What they embark upon, once the bindings of polite behavior are unlaced, is less a gratification than a creative act; as Héloïse says, “Do all lovers feel they’re inventing something?” If you admire the Rokeby Venus—Velázquez’s languid nude, who regards herself in a mirror, held up by a helpful Cupid—but believe that it merits a response, consider Marianne. Placing a circular looking glass against the groin of the naked Héloïse, she uses it to draw herself, on the page of a book that her beloved will read and keep.

Throughout, the two of them are waited on by a maid, Sophie (Luàna Bajrami). Bit by bit, her servility softens into companionship, and the three women play a merry game of cards. There’s also an extraordinary sequence, more tearful than gruesome, in which Sophie has an abortion at the hands of a local elder. (The impregnator is never mentioned.) While she heals, she is waited upon, in her turn, by Marianne and Héloïse; as one of them says, “Equality is a pleasant feeling.” For an instant, I heard the rumble of the coming Revolution, and wondered how Sciamma would conclude her engrossing movie. In violent devastation, perhaps? Well, yes, but the violence is that of a storm-tossed heart, and the final shot is of a woman—I won’t reveal who—shaken by ungovernable sobs, with smiles breaking through like shafts of sunlight. Reckon you can weather all that without falling apart? Good luck. ♦

NEWYORKER.COM

Richard Brody blogs about movies.

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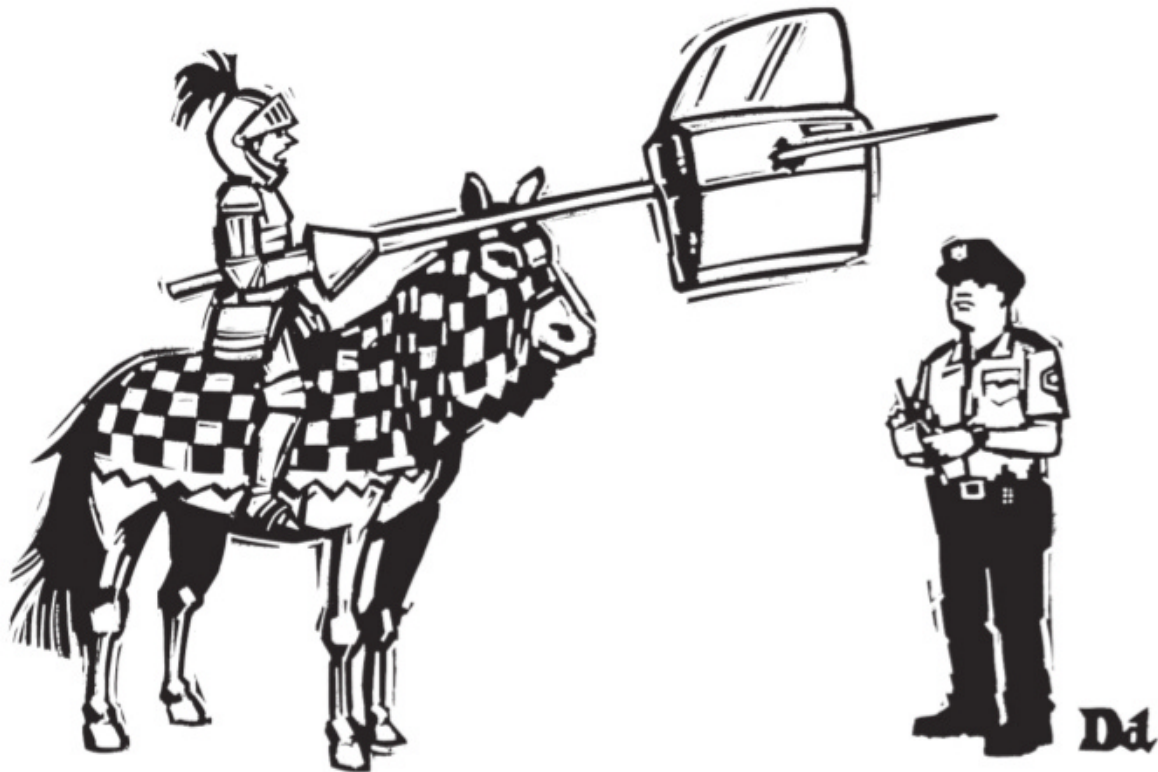
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CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Drew Dernavich, must be received by Sunday, December 8th. The finalists in the November 25th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the December 23rd issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.

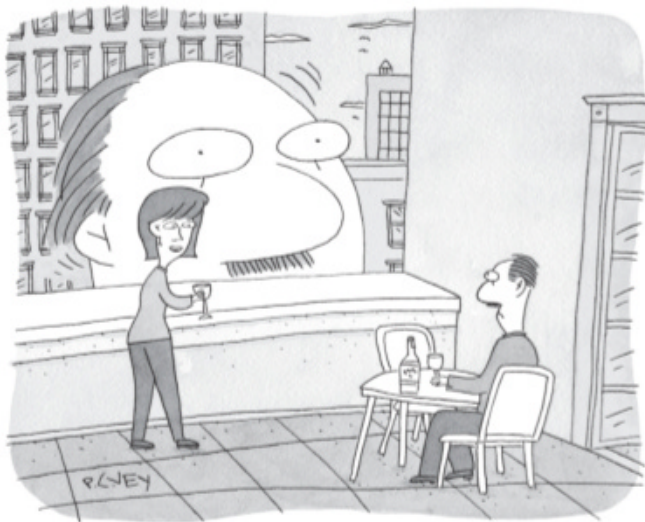
THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



“

”

THE FINALISTS



“How much did you spend at Macy's this year?”
Seth Wittner, Henderson, Nev.

“I'd hate to be on the third floor.”
Steve Marth, Brooklyn, N.Y.

“It's a perfect likeness, George. Right down to the hot air.”
Michael H. Lester, Los Angeles, Calif.

THE WINNING CAPTION



“Oh, no. I have its little one in my backpack.”
Stephen Hampson, Coram, N.Y.

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